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STORY MAGAZINE

A.N.C.

"HELLION WAS HER BRAND"

Could the grinning, trail-tough drifter bust the Quirt-Queen's pride?

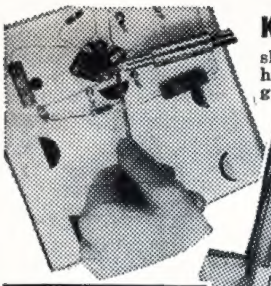
A STAMPEDE RANGE NOVELET

by WM. J. HODGSON

The KILLER PACKS A LONELY GUN

A smoke-pole Novelet

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG



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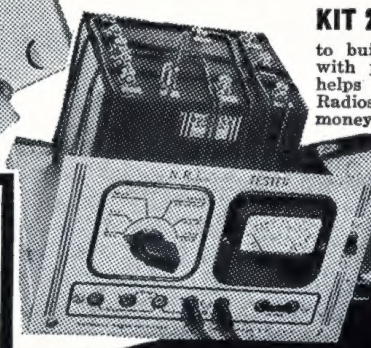

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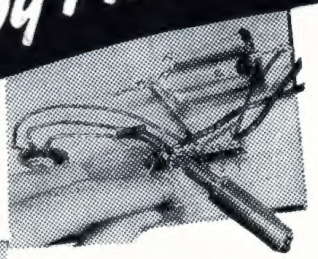

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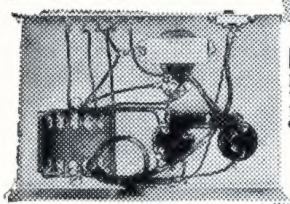

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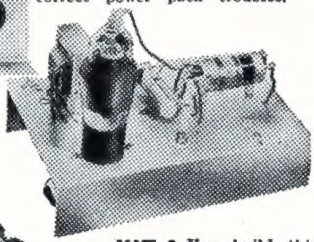

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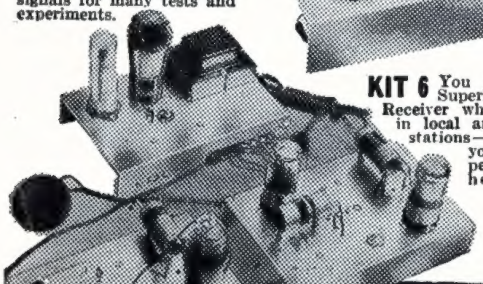

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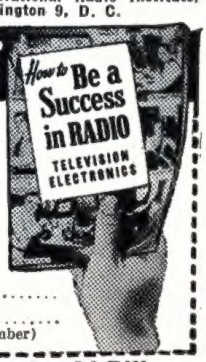

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"HELLION WAS HER BRAND" . . . . . **William J. Hodgson** 46
Can a grinning, trail-tough drifter top a red-headed, she-devil's pride? Jim was itchin' to make the test . . . and the fire-tempered McClintock wench was spurrin' him on.

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"Hellion Was Her Brand!"

By WILLIAM J. HODGSON

Can a grinning, trail-tough drifter top a red-headed she-devil's pride? Happy-go-lucky Jim Rodriguez was itchin' to make the test . . . and the fire-tempered McClintock wench was spurrin' the play.

JIM RODRIGUEZ sat easily. The back of his leaning chair was braced against the building, and the worn high heels of his boots were hooked over chipped rungs. There was an air of complete relaxation about him and about the whole town too, for that matter. Nothing moved. Here and there along each side of the street a Mexican or Indian lay in a small spot of shade trying to sleep through the boiling heat of the day. Occasionally a stray breeze hurried down the street wearing itself out making little swirls of the dry dust.

Flies droned lazily over Jim's head and with a tired curse he tugged his limp old Panama hat lower on his face. It was high noon and the sun glared brassily on the quiet scene, beating unmercifully on the bleached, unpainted boards of the shacks, and making the ground dance crazily through the shimmering heat waves.

A man walked down the center of the street, geysers of dust spurting up from his feet at each weary step. On his shoulder a saddle rode uncomfortably and his back was bent beneath the weight of a bed roll. His figure was coated a uniform dirty brown. Blue eyes squinted through the sweat-mud that covered a flat planed face made coarse by a three-day beard. Drawing abreast of Jim he said: "Say, Pardner, is this a hotel?"

Jim, unaware of the man until he had spoken, raised his hat from in front of his eyes with one long forefinger. He forgot the sweat, that dripped from his arm-pits and splashed on the lean washboard of his ribs, and the little ring of flies, that circled his head looking viciously for a place to bite. "Sure is," he said. "Get up here out of the sun and rest yourself."

"Thanks." The man clumped heavily to the porch, and throwing his saddle and pack down, he lowered his huge, angular frame into a chair beside Jim's. For a few minutes neither man spoke, each looking out at the silent street. At last the big man said: "Reckon there'd be somebody inside to give a thirsty man a drink?"

Jim grinned, his even white teeth shining through the bronze of his face. "That's the one thing you can get this time of day. Just step inside and bang on the bar. Raphael, the bar-keep, takes his siesta behind it so he won't miss a customer."

"Hate to drink alone. Could you maybe join me in a sociable mouth wash?" The big man stood up and began to beat the dust from his clothes with a wide brimmed sombrero.

"It's a pleasure. I been sitting here wondering if any noble soul would come along. Can't hardly stand drinking by myself. Tried it every day for a week now and it's beginning to get tiresome." Jim's brown eyes twinkled up at the big man. "You see I own this hotel. Won it last week in a poker game. Now I can't get rid of the son of a gun. Nobody'll buy it. Let's drink."

Together they walked into the dark bar room. Tables, scattered with no apparent pattern, seemed to stagger drunkenly on rickety legs. Along one wall a crude pine bar stretched itself the full length of the room, every inch of it a splintery threat to unwary elbows. The two men crossed to the bar and Jim began to pound heavily.

"What you want?" a muffled voice from behind the bar asked.

"We want a drink so get on your feet. What do you think I'm paying you for?" Jim's voice was low and musical. "Hurry now Raphael, before I break your legs."

A round dark face placidly unperturbed by the threat appeared above the edge of the bar. A pudgy hand scratched sleepily at a curly mop of black hair. Dark eyes gave Jim a hurt look. "You own this place,"

Up came Auburn's whip, fast as a rattler strikes.

he said. "Why the hell can't you get your own drink?"

"Now that's no way to talk to your boss. You want my friend here to think the people that work for me talk back all the time? If you don't watch out I won't pay you." Jim grinned at the fat face before him.

"Pay me?" the man squalled, as he turned to the back bar and picked up a bottle. "You don't have enough money to pay your feed bill at the stable." He turned back and slammed the bottle and two glasses on the bar then he stood looking at the stranger expectantly.

THE man dug into his pocket but Jim stopped him with a wave of the hand. "This is on the house. Since I drink with you, it wouldn't be right for you to pay me for the liquor. It's very bad anyway."

"You see? Everyone who drinks here is his friend. No one will buy this hotel from him because of the free whiskey and because they know he will have to give it away in another week." Raphael shrugged his shoulders. "He is a jackass and I'm a bigger one for working for him. I have to take my pay in whiskey because he's broke. If I didn't work for him I'd get the whiskey free because I'm his friend."

"Well if he's crazy I like it. My name is Mike Rafferty," said the big man offering his hand to Jim. "For a while I thought you two were Mexicans. You look like it you know. But I knew I was wrong as soon as I heard you talk." The big man's voice was booming jovially as he threw down half a water tumbler of whiskey and with a steady hand refilled the glass.

"Glad to meet you, Mike," said Jim. "You were right the first time. We are Mexicans. We've been traveling around the States for ten years though, seeing the sights. I guess that's why you couldn't tell from the way we talked."

"Yes," broke in Raphael. "Ten years ago he was just a dumb kid. He had a fight with the chief of police in our home town of Juarez. He punched the chief in the nose and called him names so I persuaded him it would be wise to leave before the chief got over his broken nose and came after him with a gun. That was foolish. I have been persuading him to leave towns ever since. Sometimes I think it would have been better if the chief shot him ten long years ago."

"But I thought you worked for him?" said Mike.

"I do. I have worked for him for the past ten years. Sometimes we are rich and he pays me, but mostly we are broke. I have been his valet, bronc buster, and an Indian in his medicine show, everything. One time he even advertised me as a fighter of bulls and I had to get in a ring and play toreo. The people watching didn't like that much. Especially when I had to run like hell and jump a fence. We were paid in advance so we got out of that town too."

Jim was leaning against the bar smiling. The limp Panama hat gave his thin bronze face a piratical look. "You shouldn't believe Raphael," he chuckled. "He is as strong as an ox under that blubber and he did a beautiful job as a bull fighter. I am thinking of getting him a return engagement soon," he said to Mike.

"No, Jim. I like being a bartender much better and the pay is just the same."

"But we have been in the hotel business too long. It's time for us to find a new job for you. We aren't making money here," argued Jim.

"It's comfortable here and I don't have bulls trying to gore me or kids climbing all over me asking if I scalped General Custer at the Little Big Horn. We have only been here a week," pleaded Raphael. "Let's stay just a little longer. It is comfortable here."

The big man took a mouthful of whiskey and washed it around in his mouth for a moment, swallowing it at last with a loud gulp. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand he looked at Jim and Raphael. "Ever do any horse ranching?" he asked casually.

"Horse ranching?" asked Jim. "We've worked on a horse ranch a couple of times. What has that got to with a hotel or leaving town?"

"My paw left me a little spread up on the Nevada River. I don't like horses much. They ain't got good sense. I come to town to sell the place and outfit myself. I'm going prospecting. When you raise horses all you got is horses. The one I was riding to town was so dumb it shied at a tin can and stepped in a gopher hole.

Broke his damn leg. Had to shoot him and walk ten miles to town. Prospecting, a man is likely to stumble on anything. Maybe make a million in no time at all." His blue eyes were beginning to shine and his voice rang with excitement.

"What has your horse ranch to do with my hotel?" asked Jim. "One is as bad as the other. When you run a hotel you rent rooms to drunken cowboys, drummers, school teachers or anyone else that comes along. They drink your whiskey and eat your food. In the morning you hope they have enough money to pay you. But if they haven't what can you do? Nothing!"

"Well I figure a hotel is a business you can leave to itself now and then. You've got steady money coming in and no worries. If you want to get rid of this place I'll swap you even, my ranch for your hotel. What do you say?"

Jim had just opened his mouth to speak when he caught a glimpse of color in the street.

He turned his head and watched. A girl of about twenty, mounted on a pretty little paint pony was passing. She was sitting astride the horse riding easily. Pants of fine gabardine were moulded to her legs. A white silk shirt, open at the neck, outlined her well rounded body and flaming red hair that gleamed like new copper in the bright sun, crowned a smooth creamy face from which shone deep violet eyes as soft as pansies.

Jim watched her silently, drinking in the sweetness of her form and her laughing red lips, until she passed out of sight. Turning to Mike he said: "You couldn't expect me to answer when someone like that passes by. She's as beautiful as the sun. I wonder who she is? What did you say before about your ranch?"

"That girl's a neighbor of mine up on the Nevada. But to get back to business, will you swap this hotel of yours for my ranch? Of course it ain't a big place but—"

"Say no more, my friend, it is done. You are now the owner of this hotel." Jim grabbed Mike's hand and shook it. "But now that our business is done, tell me more about your neighbors or rather my neighbors. What are they like? I always like to be on friendly terms with all my neighbors."

RAPHAEL sagged against the bar and rested his fat chin against his hand. "Tell him about the girl," he said in disgust. "He don't like ranching much and neither do I. Too much hard work. It is just that when he sees a pretty girl, *pouf*, he is lost. Now we'll go and chase horses all over the state in hope that we'll run into this red-head. I would much rather tend bar in a nice quiet hotel like this."

Jim drew himself up proudly and looked down his nose at the bartender. "My people have always been ranchers," he said proudly. "It's time we were settling down and there is nothing like a ranch to settle a man. As for the girl, girls mean nothing to me. I never let my emotions sway my judgment. Sometimes I think you never want to stop wandering."

"So, I'm sorry." Raphael threw his hands up in despair. "I keep dragging you from town to town getting you into poker games, making you be my manager in prize fights when I know it pains you to see me get my head bashed in. And all this while you wanted to follow a plow and build a nice little home." Turning to Mike he said: "Now tell him all about that red-head before he begins to foam at the mouth."

"Well, her name is Auburn McClintock. Her old man is Irish and her ma is French. She's got a temper like fire and runs her old man ragged. Now she's got it into her head that she wants my ranch—your ranch it is now—for a hobby. Old man McClintock and my paw had an argument some years ago and now Auburn is raking up the old coals to put the old wolf on my trail. She wants my place for nothing. I ain't mad at him and I don't like ranching so I'm selling out. I could have sold out to him but it would sorta go against the grain. Make it look like I was giving in to that red-headed hyena."

Jim looked at him wryly. "So you do me a very great favor of swapping me your ranch. It was nice of you. Yon don't think perhaps this girl could convince her father that Mexicans are bad neighbors too? Maybe she will declare war on me too. You make her sound very spoiled for such a beautiful girl."

"Well I don't say she's spoiled," said Mike doubtfully. "All I say is, she's had her own way so long that she just ain't

got good sense any more. She's been riding all over the country like a boy, never caring much what anybody had to say about her. What she needs more than anything else is a man with a good strong hand."

"You mean a good strong hand to guide her with?"

"No! I mean a good strong hand to hit her with. And maybe a club in it would help. By criminy, if ever a woman needed beating, she's the one."

"You know, Mike?" Jim smiled. "I think you're in love with this little firebrand you talk about so much."

"Not me, friend." Mike shrugged his big shoulders and grinned. "I got a woman not a wild cat. My girl is the school teacher over in Las Cinas. Now there is a girl for you. Sweet and gentle. Never says a bad word or raises her voice. That's the kind of woman for me. I'm no lion tamer."

Jim looked at him in amazement. "But a man of your size, so big and strong. Don't you wish a woman of fire, a woman with temper that would give zest to your life? What good's being in love with a girl that is all sweetness and light?"

"You Mexicans are all crazy," said Mike in disgust. "When I want excitement I'll go and get it. But when I get married I don't want my wife handing me excitement all the time. Another thing, the guy that fools around with Auburn will find himself horsewhipped, shot, or a husband and with her you'll never know which it's going to be."

"What a woman she must be," said Jim, his eyes glowing.

"Yeah, she is a woman, but sometimes it's kinda hard to prove it," snorted Mike. "I'm gonna wash up now. See you after awhile and we'll swap deeds. After that you'll have lots of time to find out what sort of a woman she is." With that Mike clumped out to the porch, picked up his roll and saddle and started upstairs.

"Just pick any empty room," Jim called after him.

"But Jim," the bartender whispered, "all the rooms are empty. We don't have any customers at all."

"I know, my little one. But we will let him find it out for himself. He swaps us a horse ranch and a fight for an empty hotel. We shall see who got the worst of the bargain," said Jim. "Now I think I will take a little walk down the street for tobacco."

"I've got tobacco if you want some." Raphael extended a full bag of Bull Durham.

"No, no. I can't smoke all your tobacco up and leave you without even a cigarette. What sort of a friend do you think I am. It wouldn't be right to do that."

"You always smoked my tobacco before. Why should you worry about it now?" asked Raphael in surprise.

"I have been thoughtless before. From now on I will be a better friend to you, Raphael. I will go out now and buy some tobacco." Jim walked casually toward the door. "Anyway it is a beautiful day and I need the exercise."

II

JIM STEPPED through the door, but not soon enough to miss Raphael's parting yell: "Don't stub your toe on any redheads." With a deprecating, backward wave of the hand, he continued down the street to the general store. His quick eye caught sight of the little paint standing docilely at the hitching rack, and he smiled in self congratulation. He did not extend his leisurely pace. Aware that he cut a good figure in his tan whipcord pants, hanging outside his boots, and white shirt, which was only a little the worse with sweat, he approached the store confidently and arrived just as the girl was coming out.

Jim tipped his hat and bowed just a trifle from the waist. "Good afternoon," he said with a friendly little smile. Yet his tone was just impersonal enough to forestall any hint of boldness. It was the sort of "good afternoon" that he might have said to a sick old maid or an acquaintance's wife.

The girl, her head high, looked at him coolly and without answering, or even acknowledging his presence by so much as the flicker of an eyelid, walked to her horse. She was carrying a small bundle in one hand, with the other she pulled the reins loose from the rack and began to swing up on the horse. Frightened by the swinging bundle, the little pinto shied away, and eyes rolling, began to paw the ground and force her against the rail. In one quick,

lithe step Jim was at the horse's head and, taking hold of the bit, yanked him away from her and quieted him.

"Take your hands off that horse," said the girl. Her tone was angrily low and hre violet eyes had deepened to dark purple.

"If you will allow me to hold him while you mount, I would be deeply honored," smiled Jim easily.

"I said take your hands off that horse." The quirt, dangling from her wrist, whipped out and wrapped cruelly around Jim's arm. "I can handle any horse and I don't need any help doing it. Now get away from my horse and get out of my way before I really use this quirt on you."

Jim let go of the bit and smiling coolly, he grabbed her by the arm and twisted the quirt from her hand. Throwing it into the dust at her feet he said, "I was told you were mean. They say around here that you've got a bad temper, that you have as much of the milk of human kindness in you as a diamond back rattler. When I heard that, I had hopes that you would be a dangerous woman. A woman of flame. But no! All I find is a little spoiled brat. A little girl in pants, trying to play the big bad man. If you ever try using a quirt on me again I'll take you over my knee and spank you as your father should have done long ago." Jim released her and stepped away.

With a swoop Auburn had the quirt. It swung high for a vicious slash. Her face was flushed with rage but the quirt hesitated and fell unused to her side. She turned and mounted her pinto silently. Wheeling it back toward him she breathed: "I'll kill you some day for saying that to me."

Jim laughed in her face. It wasn't a mocking laugh, it was a joyous laugh that rank like a bell. "Ah, my little one, you are welcome to try to all you want. But I warn you, I shall take you over my knee each time you try. Perhaps I'll never put the fear of God in your heart but I'll put respect for Jim Rodriguez all over your little red bottom. Now go away little girl, I am a busy man." Jim turned and walked into the store without a backward glance.

Auburn's whole body felt hot in the flame of her hatred. Savagely she spurred the little horse and thundered out of town. Even the wind whipping her face failed to cool her. All the men she had ever met before had been her slaves. Even her father had catered to her. Now this man came out of nowhere and laughed at her and called her names. She hated him even if his thin dark face was good looking and his voice did sound like the low note on a violin.

That night Auburn stalked back and forth through the house, her face stormy. At last she dropped into a chair, her legs sprawled out, and stared moodily ahead looking neither right nor left. Once or twice her father eyed her curiously but he refrained from speaking.

"Do you know a man named Jim Rodriguez, Dad?" she asked.

"Nope. Can't say I know him. Heard about him though. They say he won the hotel from Harvey Anderson a week ago in a poker game. Sort of drifted into town about a month back with another fellow. Mexican, ain't he?" Dave reached into his pocket and dragged out a crusty old pipe and carefully filled it with shavings from a plug of tobacco. He struck a match on the seat of his pants and lit it. Sitting back he smoked pretending no interest in the question.

There was a long silence and then the girl continued: "I guess he is. He thinks he's quite a ladies' man. He called me names today and said he was going to spank me. Just because he's good looking he thinks he can walk up to a girl and have her fall into his arms. He tried to hold my horse for me. As though I was one of the squealing females he must be used to. I hit his arm with my quirt and he grabbed me and yanked it off me. I'll shoot him for that."

Dave McClintock covered a little grin and blew out a great cloud of smoke. "Sure you don't want me to take care of him for you?" he asked. "I can't have people roughing up my little girl and threatening to spank her like she was a baby."

Auburn looked at him doubtfully, not sure whether he was laughing at her or not. "No," she snapped. "I'll take care of him myself. I'm as good as any man."

THE next day Jim and Raphael started for the ranch. Jim was mounted on a tall rangy buckskin and Raphael had a small compact roan that seemed to bounce

along on springs. It was a cool morning and the odor of sage gave a spiced perfume to the air. Jim was happy and from time to time snatches of song burst from his mouth. He was going to be a neighbor to that girl with the hair that glowed like red gold. Raphael looked at him glumly, at the sound of a gay little song, then spitting with elaborate expressiveness and contempt he again fixed his eyes on the trail.

"Raphael, my friend, why are you so gloomy?" asked Jim, staring at him in surprise. "The morning is cool, you have a good horse between your knees and the air is sweet as honey to the nose. Now, my old one, tell me, why do you make long faces and act like this?"

"What a question. You trade a perfectly good hotel for a run down horse ranch. What the hell did you expect me to do, cheer? A shack and a hundred head of horses for a first class hotel . . . You can get 25 bucks a head for the horses the way prices are. A good trade." Raphael once more turned to his state of silent disgust.

"Where is your sense of adventure?" asked Jim. "Would you want to be a common bartender in a third-rate hotel rather than a true vaquero? No! Of course you wouldn't. You would get stale and soft in a job like that."

"It was a first class hotel, not a third rate one. If we had stayed we could even have got customers. As for the adventure: While you adventure around the countryside singing love songs, I'll be working like a bronc buster. It ain't romantic to have some dumb beast pound the end of your spine into a horse shoe just because nobody told him man was his boss."

"Raphael," said Jim with a sigh. "There are time when I despair of you. Sometimes I think the glow of romance has never entered the common clay of your adobe heart. Always you long for ease and money. What are these things when all is counted? Nothing! Can they compare with the sun of a new day, the sight of new country, the breath of a fresh breeze? No! These are things you cannot buy with money."

"Maybe so," grumbled Raphael. "But the man with a little money has a lot more time and ease of mind to enjoy the things he can't buy. The new sun shines just as bright for him as for a bum and if that cool breeze ever gets too cold at least with money you can get out of it."

Jim brought his horse to a halt. "My friend, lest I absorb some of your dull spirit and mercenary philosophy, you go on to the ranch alone. I will turn off here and make our presence known to our new neighbors. It would not be right for us to pass by when they live only five miles away. It should not take too long to make myself known. Expect me about six this evening."

The fat man turned his palms up in a gesture of hopelessness. "It is now eight and you expect your short visit to last till six tonight. By that time you should be married to the girl." He kicked his roan into an easy canter and continued down the trail toward the Nevada River.

Jim sat his horse easily and watched his friend pass out of sight before he turned. There was a grin of understanding affection on his brown face. For ten years Raphael had grumbled and followed him, had tried to keep him out of the adventurous little brawls he loved so well, and then, when he saw it was impossible, had plunged in after him like an old she bear after its cub.

Making his way up a dry wash he headed slowly for the McClintock ranch. He hadn't gone far when a shot rang out and he felt his hat flick off his head as though by a finger of the wind. Without a moment's hesitation he sagged limply in the saddle and rolled to the ground. The buckskin stopped and began to nibble at stray, brown patches of weeds.

For fifteen minutes he lay there supinely. The sun beat mercilessly on his bared head and flies added to the torment by dragging heavy feet over his face and crawling inquisitively up his nose.

At last satisfied that the bushwhacker didn't intend to check on his shot, Jim got up. He picked his hat off the ground and stared ruefully at the bullet hole. Then, putting it over his wavy brown hair, sun-bleached in spots to an almost blond color, he walked stiffly to his horse and mounted.

He had just settled himself in the saddle when Auburn came dashing down the wash on her paint. At sight of him her eyes narrowed unpleasantly. She pulled her pony down to a walk and approached him slowly.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "This is my land and I don't want you on it. Now get out of here before I shoot you." She patted the polished walnut stock of a Winchester that poked from beneath her trim knee.

"You mean, perhaps, that you don't want me here alive?" said Jim "I'm convinced that you would have had no objection to finding me here dead if you were a better shot."

"What do you mean? If I shot at you you'd be dead. Now get off this land, you ugly beast, before I do take a shot at you." Her eyes were fairly blazing.

JIM kneed his buckskin closer to her. "I didn't expect you to admit it, my sweet, but you will have to pay for your bad marksmanship anyway." He took off his hat and ran his finger suggestively through the bullet hole. "What a way to greet a neighbor. When I am gone, you can console yourself that the shot was close enough to ruin my hat and scare the hell out of me. Now let's get on with business." One long thin hand reached out quickly and grabbed her arm. Dismounting, he pulled her from her horse, struggling furiously, and sat down on a large boulder. With a lithe twist he had her across his knees. He proceeded to apply the palm of his hand, filling the air with loud resounding smacks. Gradually her struggling ceased and she began to sob. He stood her on her feet and grinned at her. "That should teach you that there is at least one man in this country that you can't walk all over. Better hunting next time."

"But I didn't shoot at you, you brute," she wailed. She was rubbing the seat of her pants tenderly and sniffing back her tears. "When I shoot you, and I'm going to, you'll know you've been shot." She wiped her running nose on the sleeve of her shirt and looked very small.

Jim walked back to her, and raising her face by a forefinger under her chin, kissed her very gently on the mouth. "Perhaps you didn't shoot at me, little one. I don't know. But if you didn't you still deserved that spanking for being such a nasty tempered little witch. Just remember to be a good little girl and maybe next time I'll kiss you without tanning your bottom first. It's a nice little bottom." Jim kissed her again, mounted, and rode back down the wash.

Auburn watched him go, feeling a little weak and upset. She had never felt like this before. Her eyes were still wide in amazement when he passed out of sight. At last she hobbled to her horse and mounted painfully. Her mind was in a turmoil as she rode home. She hated him; hated him as she had never hated anything before. Oddly she remembered how the sunbleached locks of his dark brown hair had gleamed, the softness of his brown eyes, and the flashing whiteness of his teeth when he laughed. He was handsome, and no doubt innumerable stupid women were wild about him. She hated him for that too. She remembered his kiss and her heart paused for an instant and resumed in a discordant flurry. That surprised and angered her more. Just wait till they met again.

Slowly she rode home. Once or twice she tried to canter the horse but even the easy gait of the lope was a painful and unpleasant reminder of his big hand and she was forced to pull the paint down to a gentle walk. It was a long slow journey but at last she pulled the little horse to a slow stop in front of the house and crawled stiffly off. With streaks from the tears on her cheeks she hobbled painfully into the house.

Old Dave McClintock was sitting in a great leather chair when Auburn came into the room. He looked at her painful stride and jumped up. The huge mane of white hair above his creased, wind burned face made him look like a hoary old lion. He looked at his daughter with eyes darkened by grave concern and asked: "What happened to you, baby? Hurt yourself?"

"No," she snapped. "That fellow I saw in town yesterday met me today and beat me up." She eased into a chair biting her lips to keep from whimpering.

"Beat you up," he roared. "That's going a little too far. No man cay lay a hand on my daughter and not pay for it. I'm going to see that man and settle with him."

"Somebody shot at him and he thought it was me. He pulled me off my horse and spanked me as though I were a baby. It was so humiliating. Then he kissed me," she said. "You leave him alone, Dad. He might think I can't take care of myself.

I'll fight my own battles."

Her father looked at her glowing eyes and shook his white head. "Yes, I guess you will fight your own battles and I'll bet that youngster would rather tackle me any day. I think I'll visit him just to see what he looks like." He put on his hat and turned toward the door.

"You won't find him in town, Dad," she called. "He said he was our neighbor. I wonder where he can be working?"

The old man looked back. "He's got Mike's place. Swapped his hotel for it. Rod Grimes dropped by about twenty minutes before you got home and told me the news. He seemed kinda put out. He wanted that place, too."

"Oh, that dirty beast. He tried to buy it from Mike. He tried threats and bluff but you know how stubborn Mike is. As soon as Rod threatened him he got his back up and wouldn't sell," she said contemptuously.

"Seems I heard rumors that you were after it, too." The old man grinned at her. "Did you threaten him like Rod?"

"Oh, Daddy don't be such a fool. I knew he was going broke so I offered to buy it so Rod wouldn't get the place. Mike got up on his high horse and I got mad at him. The way it ended he wouldn't sell it to either of us. He's convinced that we're both crooks. I think the only reason he traded for the hotel was so that he wouldn't have to sell to either of us." She moved painfully in her chair. "I hope this Rodriguez doesn't sell it to him."

"Well, I'll just amble over and take a look at him. He must be quite a man." McClintock walked out and caught up a horse. Saddling it he swung up and started out but he changed his mind and rode back by the house. "Sure it wasn't you that shot at him?" he called.

"Of course, I'm sure," she answered. "You know if I shot at him I'd hit him. I didn't even know he was there."

"Just thought I'd ask. I know you wouldn't lie to me." The old man put spurs to his horse and cantered away.

III

JIM rode into the ranch yard and looked around. The adobe buildings had a slightly run down appearance. True, they were of massive construction, but lack of care made them look like old Indian ruins. The corrals had poles missing here and there and there was a deadening air of desertion, but for Raphael's little roan and a tall grey mare, that seemed to cover everything. Evidently Mike has spent more time prospecting than taking care of the place.

He dismounted and walked into the house. "Ho, Raphael," he called, "Where are you in this morgue?"

"In here Jim. I am entertaining a guest." The answer echoed hollowly from the walls of the scantily furnished rooms. "Come in and meet one of your neighbors."

Jim followed the sound of Raphael's voice through a doorway to an enormous living room. Bits of harness, old spurs and a couple of guns hung from the walls. Stiff looking chairs with laced rawhide seats were scattered about. In one of these chairs sat a giant of a man. Standing, he must have been fully six and a half feet tall. Even sprawled out with one arm dangling from the old, black table he seemed to dwarf the room.

His face was covered with a blue-black stubble of beard. Tobacco juice formed little stained rings at the corners of his mouth. He was dressed in patched Levi's and his shoddy boots, run down at the heels, were caked with mud and manure.

Jim looked at the big man in distaste but he was careful not to let it show on his face. It wasn't the big man's clothes that repulsed him. He had learned long ago not to judge a man from externals. But there was a stamp of cunning brutality on the man's face that must have been etched there by years of viciousness. Still Jim smiled pleasantly and walked to the man with extended hand. "I am happy to meet you," he said. "My name is Jim Rodriguez and no doubt my comrade Raphael has been so polite as to introduce himself to you."

The big man ignored the outstretched hand. "My name is Rod Grimes." His voice was coldly metallic. "I came over to buy your place here. I know you just got it off Mike Rafferty and I figured maybe you'd be smart and make a quick profit on it. I'm right, ain't I? You do want to sell it."

"On the contrary my friend," said Jim softly. "I have only just acquired this beautiful place, it is true, but already I am attached to it more than I can say. Always during my wandering I have wanted to own a little ranch and settle down. Now, at last, I have that place and here I will stay."

"Now look friend, I don't have time to horse-trade with you so don't give me a song and dance." He took a quick glance at Jim. His pig-like eyes gleamed with cunning. "You know a lot of people around here just don't take to strangers. Take that hat of yours for instance. It's got a hole in it. Now I'd say just from lookin' at it, that it's a recent bullet hole. Bein' as it's in your hat I'd say whoever did it meant to miss you. Sort of a warnin'. Now I'd say again that whoever was sure enough to hit your hat could have just as easy hit your head. Who knows but what the next time they'll try for the head. I'm figurin' to do you a favor by taking this place off your hands so you can move on. Now you've changed your mind, ain't you."

"No, my friend," chuckled Jim. "It makes the desire to stay all the greater. Ordinary neighbors are very dull. Now that I know how interesting mine are I could not think of leaving. Anyway, now that I know people are going to shoot at me, I will practice ducking to make the target harder to hit. It was nice of you to visit me. Remember my home and all I own is at your service. Goodbye."

The big man stood up and walked to Jim. He stood imposingly for a long moment in front of the smaller man and said: "Look greaser, I've been nice to you. Now I'll make myself plain. You're gettin' off this place and sellin' it to me at my price or I'll kill you. Folks around here don't ask too many questions about me and even fewer about dead greasers. Understand?"

"My friend," said Jim coolly, "if you thought you were being subtle before you are even more stupid than you seem. As for that word 'greaser,' I find it annoying. I think I shall have to teach you a lesson about Mexicans." With that Jim's hand curled up into a hard ball of bone and muscle, sank into the big man's stomach just below the ribs. He had risen on his toes and put his whole body behind the blow. Rod fell forward, gasping in agony, only to be lifted straight by a fast vicious tattoo of hard punches in the face. Futilely he tried to cover himself from the fierce attack but still the fists pounded in the solar plexis mercilessly. Slowly he recovered from the painful blow only to have another pound into the same spot and bend him agonizingly again. The hard fists continued their slashing until finally he toppled to the floor like a felled tree.

Jim watched him fall, then bending forward he removed the Colt from the big man's holster and slipped it into his belt. "Raphael," he said. "Get a bucket of water and splash it on this bit of carrion. We can't have garbage in our beautiful living room."

Raphael walked to the kitchen and getting a pail came back and slowly poured it on the unconscious man's upturned face. "That's probably the first time his pan has been washed in a week. You should have done that outside so we wouldn't have blood and water all over the floor."

"If I hadn't hit him first it would be my blood," said Jim. "Rather his blood on the floor than mine on the ground outside."

Raphael carried the empty bucket out and a few minutes later he returned. The big man was just sitting up dazedly. Jim stood waiting tensely, his eyes cold. At last the man staggered to his feet and stood swaying drunkenly. Blood streamed from his nose and mouth and fell in wet little drops on the floor.

"You had better go now, my friend," said Jim in a voice that seemed to cut through the fog that covered his brain. "Next time be more careful about who you call greaser. Some people resent it. Now get out."

Rod's hand brushed graspingly over his empty holster. His mouth opened once or twice as though to speak and then clamped silently shut. But his eyes were expressively vocal as they glittered with snake-like intensity through puffed lids. He turned on his heel and walked from the room with Jim following closely after him. He mounted his horse and rode off a little distance. Suddenly he wheeled and pulled a Winchester from under his leg. It flashed to his shoulder in one swift movement.

Jim gathered himself for a swift leap to one side when Raphael's voice inter-

rupted him. "Don't worry, Jim, I emptied that gun when I went after the water."

His voice was calm and bored. An instant later they heard the dull snap of the hammer and saw the big man lever his gun and try again. "You know, Jim, you would be dead a long time ago if I didn't always think of these things." He shrugged in disgust. "You must learn to be more careful."

"So true, Raphael, my brother. Without you I would be a man without a right arm," said Jim laughing.

"You mean without a brain, you simpleton," growled Raphael. Yet he glowed with pleasure.

TOGETHER they watched the beaten man turn and ride away. Raphael started mopping up the watery mess on the floor and Jim dropped into a chair and relaxed.

Slowly he built himself a cigarette and lit it, then he began to knead his hands, stiff from pounding Grimes' bony face.

They hadn't been in the house long before they heard a call from outside. "Hello, the house, anybody at home today or did you all take off for the hills?"

Jim sprang to his feet like a cat and drew the gun he had taken from Rod. "Go to the door, Raphael, and invite our new visitor in. Perhaps everyone in this country is note quite as warlike as our last guest, but I will stand behind the door with this gun until we find out."

Raphael walked to the door, treading with a light dancing step that was surprising in so heavy a man. Opening the door so that he was partially protected by the frame he said: "Come in stranger. If you sit out there you're liable to get sun stroke."

"Thanks, son," the voice answered. A moment later white haired Dave McClintock stepped through the door. He looked at Raphael and then glanced around the room. "You ain't Jim Rodriguez," he said. Then a grin flashed over his face. "You can come out from behind the door, son. I come here peaceful so there won't be any scalps flying today."

Jim stepped from behind the door and smiling at the old man he shoved the gun in his waist band. "Come into the living room, sir. I have come to understand that people in this part of the country always have a reason when they visit so let's be comfortable while we talk." Then turning to Raphael he said: "Oh little one, see if perhaps our friend Mike left us any refreshments. Whiskey is always the thing to make a guest feel at home." Then, following McClintock into the big room, he carelessly hung his gun on a peg in the wall, and sat down.

Dave watched him closely as he put up his gun and then nodded his head in approval. Sitting in the big chair that Grimes had so lately occupied, he studied the young man before him. Suddenly he said: "From what I'd heard of you I figured you'd be quite a man. Hanging up your gun like that sort of proves it to me." He glanced at the floor. "What you been doing, son? Mopping up the floor at this time of the day don't seem like a job for a grown man."

Jim smiled enigmatically. "Mopping up this floor was truly a job for a man. I have never had to use such a big mop before in my life. For a little while I thought perhaps I should get either a smaller mop or a much, much bigger floor."

"Seems you skinned your knuckles some doing the job. I admire a man that works hard and don't mind losing a little skin doing it." He pulled a sack of tobacco from a vest pocket and proffered it. Jim made a cigarette and returned the sack. The old man filled his charred briar and lit it.

Raphael came into the room carrying a one-gallon jug and three glasses. He thumped the jug down in front of Jim and put the glasses beside it. With a sigh he settled into a chair. "I don't know just what's in that jug but it sure smells like whiskey. That Mike must be some man. There's ten of those jugs out in the kitchen."

"Oh Mike was a pretty good boy," said the old man. "He took a drink once in a while but mostly he kept it for company. It's good whiskey, too. Old Julio, up the river, makes it. He makes the best corn whiskey around here."

Jim took the jug and poured the three water tumblers full to the brim. "I have always thought that this was the way to serve whiskey," he said. "Why put a little in a glass often when you can put a lot in a glass once? It saves so much

time that way." He lowered the jug and passed the glasses. Picking up his own he raised it courteously. "Your health, father," he said, and drank.

Raphael took a gulp of his whiskey and then turned to Jim. Digging in his pocket he brought out a handful of cartridges and poured them on the table. "I don't know how you got that hole in your hat," he said. "But when I took these from that big pug's gun this empty shell was in the chamber."

"Thanks. He told me he was the one that shot at me so it's old news. We'll just keep this empty case though. You can never tell when a wolf like that one will use his gun so it may come in handy. Something tells me I'll be his target again soon." He casually dropped the shell in his pocket and took another sip of the whiskey.

"THAT hole in your hat is sorta the reason I came to call on you," said the old man.

Jim looked at him out of the corner of his eye. "I had guessed that. You aren't quite as direct as your lovely daughter. Perhaps age has cooled your temper."

"Yep, I'm Auburn's daddy. She told me all about you. How you were mean to her in town and how you spanked her today because you thought she shot at you."

He paused thoughtfully.

"And now you have come after me to horsewhip me after daring to lay hand on her," finished Jim wryly.

"Well no. I came here to tell you that she wouldn't have shot at you before. Of course I can't guarantee about now. You've got her all mixed up and a woman is likely to explode when she feels that way. Then too, I wanted to take a look at you. I figured it would take a mighty big man to spank her." He paused and grinned at Jim. "You ain't so big. If I hadn't seen Rod Grimes riding away from here I wouldn't have believed it. As for the horsewhipping, I reckon not. I'm not so old my temper is cooled. I've just learned to control it. I never had the heart to spank that girl myself but she needed it and it was about time somebody did."

"It's good to have a friend in the enemy's camp," said Jim. "But it surprises me that a man like you should let your daughter act as she does. She is not a gentle lady."

"I guess it's my own fault. She's my only baby and I tried to bring her up like a boy. Sometimes I think I made a mistake," the old man sighed. "For the last couple of years I've let her run the ranch. Now she thinks I don't know what's going on any more. Of course I give her hints now and then but she always thinks they're her own ideas. She's been trying awful hard to act like a man. Pretty soon she'll learn it's a lot more fun for a girl to act like a woman."

"Is that why you came to see me? To tell me about your daughter, our lovely Auburn, seems a strange reason to ride all this way," said Jim. "We appreciate your visit but something tells me you came for some other reason than just to visit a neighbor."

"You're right, son. I came over to tell you about Rod. I didn't figure he'd rush right in here like that. Since he's been here I reckon there ain't much more to say." The old man stood up. "I'll be drifting along now. Expect me over from time to time. I like to talk to people."

"Before you go would you mind telling me why that pig Grimes is so interested in buying this place?" asked Jim. "A poor ranch, a few horses and a lease on some government land seems to be a bad reason to start a fight."

"Well, Rod runs sheep on the other side of the divide. He's a pretty big man, too. I run cattle over here and I'm pretty big in a way. We never had any trouble to speak of because he can't come over here with his sheep. I own all the river frontage from the canyon to your place and you've got the land right up the barrens. Since he can't get water here, and his sheep would die if he brought them over, he's tried to buy you out. Now there's a big profit in sheep. Don't like their smell myself. Rod wants to expand. Be a sort of sheep king. He's been trying to force Mike out since Mike's old man died." He shrugged his shoulders. "See how it is?"

"I think I do. Mike is one very stubborn fellow. He would not like Grimes and so would not sell this ranch to him. Then again, he doesn't like Auburn because of her bad temper and would not

sell to her. Since he was going broke and did not like horses too much he had to get rid of the place. Rather than sell to either Grimes or Auburn, and admit defeat he traded with me. It must have been a shock to the big pig when he found his waiting game was not working." He paused thoughtfully. "So that's why I was shot at and that's why Grimes threatened me. I thought it was something bigger than this little place."

"That's about the size of things." Dave walked out to his horse and Jim followed. He mounted then looked down grimly. "Let me give you a hint, son. When Mike took over this place after his paw's death he had a thousand head of horses. Now Mike is a mighty poor business man and he kept selling his horses and running off on prospecting trips. He sold about five hundred head doing that and not a one more. Now I tried to tell Mike but he didn't keep any records. He just laughed and said he sold them. He thought I was an old crackpot. Somewhere you've got about four hundred head of stock. They weren't shipped out of this country or I would have heard about it. I've got friends. Think it over a little, boy."

"Thank you, my father, I will," said Jim smiling. "It seems someone was giving Mike a not too gentle push on his way to the poorhouse. Then again it might have been some ordinary horse thieves making the best of a golden opportunity. I will not jump to conclusions, but as you suggest I will think about it."

The old man nodded and cantered out of the yard. Jim watched him as he went and a smile of genuine liking split his brown face. Dave turned and waved at him and he waved in return and turning went back into the house.

"He talks too much," grumbled Raphael after McClintock had left. "He's a good hearted old steer but he talks too much to be smart."

"Not so, my little one. He is old and very wise. He sits like an old eagle on a mountain watching the men around him display their tricks. He allows his daughter to run their ranch but always his hand is active. If you are so foolish as to think that he came over here to pay us a friendly call you are stupid. If you think he told us all that he did just to help us and not to help himself you are mad," said Jim thoughtfully. "He will let the wolf, Grimes, wear himself out on me and when Grimes is weary he will swoop down like an eagle and take the game from him. He is too wise to fight in the open against so strong an oppnent."

"Well, what do we do now?" asked Raphael.

"Nothing today, but tomorrow we will ride out and find our four hundred horses, and as he said, perhaps we will look around for a few more." Jim laughed joyfully. "Who knows perhaps we didn't turn too bad a bargain in our trade now that we are ranchers."

"We have traveled from Mexico to Canada and from New York to Los Angeles living on our wits. Sometimes we were bums and sometimes we were rich. It was a great life," sighed Raphael. "Now we are horse ranchers and we'll have to work—phooie."

IV

THE NEXT MORNING Jim and Raphael were out in the cool light of the dawn saddling the horses. To the west the craggy, canyon-split hills of the divide were clad in a cool blue mist not yet burned by the rising sun.

Jim snapped the cinch tight on his tall buckskin and turned to the waiting Raphael. "You take the country to the east of the river as far as the barrens. Keep a close tally on the horses you see. I will go to the west as far as the divide. Meet me here at six tonight and we'll see just how rich we are." Then he swung easily into the saddle and started off toward the blue hills.

"Maybe I should come with you," called Raphael after him. "You're going over toward Grimes land and he won't forget that beating you gave him. He may be waiting to take a shot at you."

"Don't worry, my little one. I am off on business today. I do not intend to go near the big pig. Perhaps some other day you and I shall go to his hog wallow and pull his nose but not today," returned Jim. "Now be off with you about your buiness and if you see a couple of good horses cut them out and bring them in. We will need more than one apiece." With that he rode on without a backward glance

and left Raphael, growling like a wounded bear, to start across the river.

By afternoon Jim had covered most of the ground he had assigned to himself. Carefully he had combed the canyons along the divide. They were lush and green with grass. He had found four bands of horses each having about twelve mares, a stallion and one or two yearlings. All in all he had counted a little over sixty horses. It was just about the number he had expected and he was about to turn back toward the ranch when he heard the whistling of a stallion.

A half mile away a great bay stood outlined against the sky. This was a horse that Jim did not remember. He would have remembered such a magnificent beast, of that he was sure. Just as he was about to spur his horse up the ridge toward the bay, a horseman appeared and drove the stallion down out of sight.

Jim dismounted and made his way cautiously on foot to where he had seen the horse. He arrived on the ridge just in time to see the horseman lead the stallion to the end of a cul-de-sac. There was a struggle and Jim saw the man drag the great bay out of sight at the end of the apparently exitless canyon. He waited for the horse or man to reappear but all was quiet. Slowly he crept his way along the barren ridges that bordered the bleak rocky cleft. There was nothing there. At last he made out a crack in the far wall. The top of the crack was barely a foot wide but it opened at the bottom leaving room for a horse to pass through. The entrance was hidden from the ground by great boulders.

With great care Jim eased his way around to the cracked canyon face. There was nothing to be seen only the crack leading off the west where its uphill slant seemed to stop against the sheer wall of a cliff. Hugging the ground tightly he crawled along the edge of the split. For about half a mile he traveled that way along a flat rocky plateau, devoid of all life. Suddenly the ground seemed to groan under his hands and he was looking into a long, grassy, steep-sided cut. Beneath him, horses cropped contentedly, and by a small cabin two men sat smoking. There were the missing horses. Now all he had to do was get them and he would have a fair start as a rancher.

He crept back to his buckskin and rode slowly back toward the ranch. There was much to think about so he didn't hurry. What was he to do. To get into that valley with a force of men would be impossible. It was too well fortified by nature to take by assault. Then again he didn't have any friends in town, being a stranger. He could ask McClintock for help. No, that was out. Auburn would see that he didn't get it, and would laugh at him for asking. There was the sheriff. That would be the logical thing but no sheriff likes to throw men away in a place like that. Again, he wanted to prove that Grimes was at the bottom of those stolen horses and he could not do that by rushing in. Grimes would be sure to hear the news and be absent when the raid occurred.

Jim rode on slowly, preoccupied by his thoughts. He was almost home. The horse made its way down a wash used as a road and began to liven its gait a little. Jim looked up in surprise, then leaning forward, he spurred the horse into a lope. From the bank of the wash fire lashed out at him with a sharp crack. He felt a pluck at the back of his shirt and began to swing down to the side of his horse. He had about gotten the protecting body of the buckskin between him and the unknown marksman when the rifle spoke again. This time there was a flash of fire in his head and then blackness. His body dropped limply from the side of the running buckskin and hit the ground heavily. He rolled over once, carried by the momentum, and then lay spread out awkwardly.

AUBURN McCLINTOCK had been watching Jim for some time as he made his slow way to the ranch. Just the sight of him upset and enraged her. She pulled her horse to a stop on the side of a little rise she knew he must pass on his way to the house. Dismounting, she drew the Winchester from the saddle boot and sat down to wait. When he came by, she promised herself, he would have reason to regret putting his big hands on her.

When old Dave had returned yesterday and told her of his visit she had been thrilled, but she had quickly put down that

feeling of elation. What if he had whipped that enormous, dirty-necked Rod Grimes. It was only a battle of brutes. Of course Jim was much smaller than Rod but he was strong and no doubt very brave in an animal-like way. She could just imagine him smiling coolly and pounding Grimes savagely. The thought made her heart jump a little and she forced herself once more to hate him and think of what she intended to do.

Jim appeared quite suddenly from the mouth of the wash. His horse had begun to lope a little. Auburn swung her rifle to her shoulder and looked down the barrel. She hesitated a moment, dropped the rifle, then in a burst of angry decision swept it again to her shoulder. She was about to fire when she heard a crack and saw Jim slip down along the side of his horse. She lowered her gun dazedly and looked at it. She hadn't shot, she was sure. There was another shot and her head jerked up in time to see Jim tumble to the ground.

The girl sat shocked for a minute, her mind slowly taking in the little drift of gunsmoke rising from the far side of the wash. A few seconds later came the sound of retreating hoof beats. Suddenly she was galvanized into action. With a broken little cry she ran to the supine body and dropped to her knees. She raised Jim's head to her lap and held it gently. A cruel groove ran across his temple oozing blood. Her frantic hands felt for other wounds and didn't find any. His heart beat strongly under her fingers. She tore his shirt into strips and began bandaging his head.

Slowly Jim returned to consciousness. His swimming brain suddenly snapped into focus and his head ached cruelly. He tried to open his eyes once but they seemed glued shut. There seemed to be an odd perfume in the air and it felt like someone was caressing his hair. There was a touch on his lips as light as the flutter of a butterfly's wings. He sighed in contentment and moved his head in the warm, softness of that lovely pillow. It was Auburn of course. He would know her anywhere even though his eyes were closed. But then he was dreaming, how else could it be.

When Jim sighed and rolled his head Auburn stiffened defensively. She saw the little tender smile on his face and her own mouth became soft again for an instant only to freeze angrily again. He had been awake when she kissed him. "Are you going to open your eyes now?" she asked curtly. "I know you're conscious and if you continue to fake I'll drop your stupid head on the ground."

Jim opened his eyes with a painful grimace and then closed them quickly against the sun. Again he tried it and this time succeeded in keeping them open. "Ah, my lovely one. I was just enjoying a dream. It was a most pleasant dream," he said. "And now, when I awaken to see you of whom I was dreaming, you look at me with this sour face. I think I will close my eyes and go on dreaming."

"You better not. I've got better things to do than sit around playing pillow for you. Now get up."

Jim struggled to a sitting position and looked at her. "So you are real. I was afraid you would fade away like my dream." He felt his head gingerly, his fingers running over the bandage. "You're a good shot," he said. "Are you so kind to all your surviving victims?"

"You know very well I didn't shoot you," she stormed. "Why should I try to kill you and then patch you up?"

"True, my golden one, but women are never logical." He looked at the storm signals flashing in her eyes. "But I believe you, and this time I will not spank you. Instead, for being a good little girl—" He leaned forward and kissed her gently but firmly. "If I do that often enough," he said, "it will develop into a very pleasant habit."

"Well, I'll break that habit right now," she said and raised her hand to slap him.

Jim looked at her calmly, his mouth pursed whimsically. "You would like to be spanked again?"

Her hand dropped to her side again but her chin went up. "You wouldn't dare. I had you under my sights when you rode out of that wash. I would have shot you too but somebody on the other bank beat me to it. But I promise you this, if you lay your dirty hands on me again I'll be the first to shoot next time."

"Mother of Heaven, do you expect me to be a permanent target in this shooting gallery? The person who is practicing on

me is missing closer and closer. I'm afraid if I give him one more chance you will have to find another playmate. As for spanking you," he laughed gaily. "I promise never to take you across my knees again so long as you keep your temper under control. After all, it would be a shock to have people think I am a wife-beater."

"Wife-beater?" she said indignantly. "Are you trying to tell me you are going to marry me? You know I have something to say about that. Is that your crazy way of proposing to me?"

"PROPOSING to you?" He gave a look of exaggerated shock. "After all, this is only the third time we've met. You shouldn't put ideas like that in my head. Don't you think perhaps we should wait until we know each other better? Of course I was not proposing to you so suddenly. All I meant was that we were going to be married. I knew it from the first time I saw you. But just because we both know, that is no reason we should rush the courtship. Things like that should be slow and tender, like the blooming of a rose."

Auburn began to splutter like hot fat. "Why you conceited, egotistical, dirty-necked fool. How dare you talk to me like that? I'd rather marry a full grown ape than you. You're nothing but a bull headed, stupid, brutal, heavy handed beast."

Jim's left eyebrow soared, giving him an oddly stern and yet quizzical expression. One broad hand waved in gentle patting strokes through the air. "Mind your temper now. I said I would not spank you as long as you were a nice girl. Do you think I am a mouse that my pretty future wife should bite me and not be punished? Snap at others if you will but remember that I am the boss."

"You pig," she stormed. "I'm not your wife and I never will be. When I get mad at somebody I let them know about it and you're no different from the rest. I'm as good as any man and I say what I please."

With a sigh of regret he reached for her. There was a short struggle and he had her, twisting and fighting, over his knees. There was a rhythmic smack, smack and she began to whimper and then to sob. Jim turned her over so she was sitting on his lap and pressed her head against his shoulder. She sat there sobbing quietly for a few minutes while Jim stroked her hair. In a little while her sobbing stopped and she just sat there quietly.

Jim kissed her softly and said: "Did I hurt you so much, my little one?"

"You were a brute," she answered in a small voice. "Are you sorry you hit me now?"

"Ah no. I am only sorry you needed it. It pains me to do it but I shall spank you every day until you learn to control your temper," he said. "You see how nice it is now that you are being a good girl?" He kissed her again but this time is was a hard, possessive, passionate kiss. He felt her arm creep up around his neck as she pressed tightly to him.

After a long pause Jim pulled away. "Let's find the place where my friend waited for me. I have no doubt it was Rod Grimes, but this I like to prove to myself."

Together they walked up the side of the wash to where Auburn had seen the gunsmoke. Behind a huge boulder they found deep footprints in the sandy soil. Jim saw the glitter of an ejected 30-30 case and picked it up. He drew the empty case that Raphael had taken from Rod's gun, from his pocket and compared the two. "It was our tall friend, the grimy Grimes, all right," he said.

"How can you tell?" she asked doubtfully. "The footprints are big enough and he's about the only one around here mad enough to want to kill you. But how can you be sure it wasn't one of his hired men?"

"Both of these shells are from the same gun. It was his gun that shot at me so he must have been behind it." He shrugged and smiled grimly. "I'll have to do something about this pest before he stings me again."

They walked back and Auburn, mounting her little pinto, rode to the buckskin standing patiently and led him back to Jim. Then they rode back to the ranch and waited for Raphael to return.

While they waited, Auburn tenderly washed the ugly gash in Jim's temple and carefully bandaged it again. Her hands were very deft and gentle and she seemed to pause timidly whenever Jim winced. That done, she began to make coffee and

humming happily to herself she began to set the table and prepare a hasty meal.

When Raphael entered a little later he stopped at the door in surprise at the sight and sound of feminine, domestic bustle. He stamped into the room and eyed Auburn doubtfully as though she were a half-tamed mountain lion.

Auburn looked up and caught his distrustful inquiring look. Her brows drew together and she snapped: "Well, you fat toad, didn't you ever see a woman before? Now get out of here and wash the dirt off your face so I can see if you're human. And another thing, after this wipe your dirty boots off before you come into the house."

Raphael paused and threw an imploring glance at Jim as he backed up beneath the furious tirade. "Did you marry this wildcat, Jim?" he asked. "Do something will you. Don't just sit there."

"Auburn," said Jim softly, "Raphael will be a good friend to you if you treat him like a friend. Now control yourself."

Her head snapped around and her eyes blazed at Jim. "You mind your own business. I can take care of myself. I don't like him to walk in here and look at me like I was a caged animal. And as for you—"

"Yes?" Jim's voice had a slight ironic rising inflection. A smile broke over his face.

She looked at him stormily but she didn't say anything more. At last she hung her head sheepishly and an answering smile curved her lips pleasantly. Then she began to laugh and she walked over and sat in Jim's lap and put her arms around his neck. "I'm afraid it is going to take some time to calm me down. Just have patience and don't get mad at me." She kissed him and got up and went to the table singing again.

Raphael entered again. His face was washed and his boots were wiped clean. He held his hat in his hand and when Auburn smiled at him pleasantly he looked puzzled.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted," she said. "My temper is very bad and I hurt people without meaning to."

"That's all right," Raphael shrugged. "It reminded me of how my old mother used to talk to me. She had a temper too. She used to use it on everyone, even my father. He would stand it for about two months, maybe three, and then run off to the mountains and hunt and fish for a month or two. That went on for years. Papa always said he thanked God for Mama's temper because that way he could always do what he wanted and all the neighbors sympathized with him."

"Let us forget your family for the present, my little one. What did you find in your ride today?" asked Jim. "Remember we were to take a round count on the horses?"

"I counted about forty-five," said Raphael. "Two of them I cut out and brought back with me. They look like good stock but unbroken. We will have a job on our hands before we can use them." He turned and looked at Jim, noticing the bandaged head for the first time. "What happened to you?" he exploded. "Everytime you get out of my sight something happens."

"Our good friend Grimes tried to boost me into heaven," said Jim grimly. He then went on to describe what he had seen in the box canyon. Raphael and the girl stood quietly staring at him as he spoke. "Raphael, my friend," he continued. "I think you should ride to town later and ask Mike Rafferty to come out here tonight. I think he will be interested." He turned to the girl. "And you, Auburn, if you will ask the old lion, your father, to come over with perhaps two of his men we will clean out this little nest of snakes tonight."

"All right," said Auburn, her eyes snapping. "Of course Daddy has let me run the ranch for the last couple of years but the old dear would feel left out of it if he didn't come along. I'm coming too," she added defiantly.

"No, my golden one, you are not coming too," said Jim gently. "There may be shooting and I don't want to worry about your little neck as well as my own."

"Don't you try to order me around," she flashed. "I'll have to sit around worrying about you if I don't go and you always seem to have something happening to you. Anyway I can shoot as straight as a man if it comes to that. I'm going too."

"You are not going," said Jim firmly. "Would you argue with me?"

"Yes, I'd argue with you," she yelled.

"And this time I don't care if you do spank me, you overbearing lout."

V

THEY SAT down and ate. Auburn munched her food in a rebellious silence. When they were finished Jim rolled a cigarette and smoked furiously while Auburn washed the dishes. She finished them quickly, grabbed her hat, and walked out of the door, her back stiffly proud. Jim heard the retreating tattoo of beating hoofs as she rode out of the yard and down the trail and a little smile touched his lean face.

"She is some girl, eh, Raphael," he said. "A true queen. She has temper that one. She rings like a steel blade."

"Yes," grunted the fat man. "And it will take a man of steel to live with her. She is like my mother."

Jim walked to the living room and picked up the gun belt he had taken from his bed roll the night before. He returned to the kitchen buckling it on. "You know, my little one, if I had not been a fool I would have been wearing this all day. I had almost forgotten that there are still places in this country where people have to use guns."

A horse stopped at the front of the house. Jim stepped to the side of the door and pulled his gun. A minute or two later it slammed back and Mike Rafferty walked it.

Jim gave a sigh of relaxed tension and put his gun away. "Hello, Mike," he said, "come on in and sit down. You just saved Raphael a trip to town. I was going to send him in after you." He turned to the fat man and said: "Get some food for Mike while we talk. He must be hungry after riding in from town."

"What did you have your gun out for when I came in? Have you got a war on your hands so soon? I came over to collect some of my things." The big man hunched his shoulders. "Who's bothering you?"

Jim explained cryptically what he had found out. The big man seemed to bulge with anger as the tale progressed. "As I see it," finished Jim, "those horses belong to you, since you did not know you owned them when you traded the ranch, so I thought you might want to come along with us."

"I sure want to be along," growled Mike savagely. "Maybe I don't like horses too much. Maybe my head for business ain't what it should be and maybe I did spend time prospecting that I should have spent on the ranch. That ain't no reason I should be robbed blind. I only hope that Rod Grimes is there." He made an expressive twisting motion in the air with his ham-like hands. "I'll break him into little pieces with my bare hands."

"Perhaps he will not be there. But as for that, I too have a little matter I would discuss with him," said Jim. "It will be a question of who finds him first. For me, I am beyond the stage of using my hands on him. Now I shall kill him when I see him."

Mike sat down and began gulping food noisily. He looked up as though something had just occurred to him and began speaking around a huge mouthful. "You said those horses are mine. Well I don't want them. Horses are a pain in the butt. I'm beginning to do fine down at the hotel. Got a partner now. He's putting in a couple of dice tables and maybe later we'll have a wheel. He'll take care of business and I'll have plenty time to go out prospecting."

"But I can't take the horses," said Jim. "They are yours. If I could buy them from you it would be fine but I do not have the money."

"Well if you feel that way, all right," Mike grumbled. "But since you found the damn things we'll go partners on them. You take the nags and give me half what they're worth. Don't worry about the money. I got lots of time."

"If you put it that way, Mike, I am forced to accept," grinned Jim. He shook hands gravely with the big man.

It was almost midnight when they heard Dave McClintock and his men arrive. Auburn opened the door and swaggered in defiantly. Behind her came Dave and two young punchers. They were thin, dark boys and they looked so much alike they might have been brothers. Both wore the same air of happy excited expectancy. It was obviously their first fight and they were anxious to get on with it.

Dave waved them over. "Jim, these

are two of my boys. This," he said jabbing at one with his thumb, "is Lon Hardy and the other is Ben Dorn." He turned to the young pair. "Boys, these are your new neighbors, Jim Rodriguez, and his friend, Raphael. Jim is ramrodding this show."

OLD DAVE pulled Jim to one side. "What're you going to do about Auburn?" he asked in a low voice. "I don't like to see her in on a thing like this. She might get hurt."

"Why do you ask me?" said Jim in pretended indifference. "You are her father. Speak to her. Perhaps you can drive some reason into her stubborn head."

"I tried that already. I yelled and cussed at her but she just smiled at me and said she was going. I can't understand it. Usually she yells and cusses right back at me," he said soberly. "That's what you get for letting a girl run wild."

"I will try to persuade her," said Jim, "but it seems hopeless." He turned and walked to Auburn. Taking her silently by the hand he led her into the empty living room. She followed him meekly but her lower lip was thrust out and her round little chin was hard.

In the shadows of the big room Jim slipped his arms around her. He began kissing her hair, then her eyes and finally her lips very gently. Her little hands crept up and hooked behind his neck. Her face, was thrown back, very soft and her eyes were closed dreaily.

"Auburn, my golden one," he said, "I have a question I must ask you and when I do will you promise to say yes?" His low voice quivered with restrained passion.

Her head moved from side to side. Without opening her eyes she said: "No, you lousy cheat. I will not promise to say yes to your question. Now kiss me again and next time don't try to be so subtle. You're a phoney."

"Cheat? Subtle? I was going to ask you to marry me."

"You're a rotten liar. You wanted me to promise to say yes so you could ask me not come with you." She smiled at him tenderly and patted his face. "You see how well I control my temper? I am a good girl even when I see you and daddy plotting against me."

Jim groaned in defeat and sank into a chair yanking her into his lap. She curled up and began pulling his hair. "I thought I was doing pretty good," he said hopelessly, "but you win the game."

At two the next morning they silently saddled their horses and headed for the divide. For two hard hours they rode until at last they were making their tortuous way among the cuts and gorges that marked the hills. Auburn rode close to Jim's side, never speaking, but still assured by his nearness. At last Jim pulled up and dismounted. The others imitated him. "We'll walk in from here," he said. "Dave, take Ben and go along the top." He carefully explained the way to the hidden canyon. "Do not shoot until you hear shooting from us. I do not want to kill them."

Dave McClintock nodded his shaggy white head approvingly. "All right, son. It's your say so and I can't help but agree." Then turning to Ben he said: "Let's go, youngster. It's beginning to dawn and we want to be up there before daylight." Together they started off around the canyon's rim.

Turning to the others Jim said, "We will go through the crack and into the hidden canyon. Auburn, stay here and take care of the horses."

"No!" The answer snapped like a whip. "The horses can take care of themselves, I'm coming with you."

Jim shrugged in resignation and cautioning the others to silence, walked softly into the box canyon. In the subdued light of the breaking dawn the little party picked its way among the boulders toward the concealed gash. When they were within a hundred yards of it, Jim motioned to the other to halt and went on alone. Very likely a guard was posted at the opening and he meant to find out before risking the others. Creeping warily to the great boulder that concealed the entrance he took a quick look around it. There dozing fitfully, his 30-30 leaning beside him against the boulder, sat a wiry, denim-clad little man. His thin, whiskered face shaded under the brim of his Stetson had a tense look even in his half sleep.

Sliding snakily around the boulder's edge Jim made his way quickly to the gun. His hand was just about to close on it

when the sleeping man sprang to his feet. Throwing off his stupor, he closed with Jim furiously.

Jim saw the glitter of steel sweeping in an arc toward him. He twisted and the stabbing blow sliced his shirt sleeve neatly from shoulder to elbow, leaving a thin red line down the skin. Desperately he grabbed the knife hand and held it. With a quick wrench he threw the little man off balance, and then drawing his gun with a smooth, polished movement, he swung the barrel crushingly on the unprotected head.

Breathing in deep gasps he watched his opponent sink unconscious to the ground, then lightly he turned and with long strides made his way back to the waiting party. "It is all clear now," he said between still labored breaths. "They had a man on watch but he had become very careless."

"You had a fight, didn't you?" Auburn's voice cut in accusingly. Her hands went around his arm. She stood for a minute holding it tightly, then stiffening she let go and backed away looking at her hands. There was a smear of blood on them. Slightly hysterical, she said: "You're wounded, you're bleeding. Oh darling, they've hurt you. Is it bad?"

Taking her by the shoulders Jim shook her. "It's only a scratch. The point of his knife just touched me. Now get a hold on your nerves." Turning his back on her he led the way at a rapid pace to the gap. As they passed the boulder he turned his head and said. "Raphael, tie this little weasel up and then follow us. We don't want him running loose." Then he made his way into the blind darkness of the split. Behind him the others followed stumblingly.

BEHIND them Mike whispered into the blackness toward Lon. "Did you ever see anything like Auburn there? She's seen blood before. She's seen men get broken up pretty good and it never made her act that way. Why she acted just like my little school teacher did when I cut my finger paring my nails with a jack knife."

"All women are like that, I reckon," whispered Lon at the barely visible hulk of Mike ahead of him. "They're all as hard as nails, but when they want to spread their loop for a man they get soft and gooey like that. I bet your school teacher is just as tough as Auburn."

Jim motioned them to silence and stepped out of the crack and into the lush grass of the hidden valley. The others filed out after him and they stood motionless looking across the short distance to the shack.

Placing Auburn behind a rock that commanded the entrance to the valley, Jim and the rest of the small party spread out and began crawling through the grass toward the cabin. They were at a point midway to the shack when a cry, magnified and echoed by the rocky lips of the split, rent the pre-dawn stillness. The cabin door swung back suddenly and a man holding a carbine tensely stood in it peering into the grey light of the breaking day. Jim and his party dropped flat, trying desperately to conceal themselves in the scant cover of the flat grassy plain. From behind them a shot cracked. The man dropped his gun, clutched him arm, and jumped back into the cabin. In a matter of seconds an answering volley of fire plucked the grass around the flattened men with inquisitive, leaden fingers. There was a solid thud to Jim's right and then a groan followed by a muttering string of Mexican and American oaths generously intermingled. Raphael had been hit.

Rolling onto his back he shouted desperately at the cliff. "Dave, chop up the windows and be fast." They must move, he knew, before the light was good enough for accurate shooting.

The answer to his call was a steady crack, crack from above that brought a quick silence to the cabin. Jumping to a crouching position, Jim ran to Raphael and slipping an arm under the wounded man he brought him to his feet and hurried him back to the rock behind which Auburn stood. Mike and Lon followed rapidly turning from time to time to throw a shot at the cabin.

Leaving the still cursing Raphael in Auburn's care, Jim lay along the base of the rock with only his shoulder and part of his face showing, and began to pick away at the cabin with his Winchester. Return fire had once more started and gun flashes showed between the chinks along the bottom of the crudely made shack.

From the flashes there were three men in the cabin. Jim began carefully to pick away at the chinks and soon there was a scream of pain. There was a threshing sound and then a man staggered to the door and fell on his face.

In the little lull that followed, Jim called loudly. "If you boys don't wish a dose of the same medicine come out of there with your hands up." His only answer was a clatter of shots.

Once more a furious fusillade was poured into the cabin. Relentlessly they pounded and probed each gap. At last there was a shrill yell from inside. "OK, hold it up, we're coming out." The shooting ceased and silence seemed to boom heavily into the valley. Two men, hands held high, stepped out of the door and waited nervously.

Jim stood up with his Winchester cradled easily on his left arm. "Pick up your friend and carry him over here," he called. They obeyed reluctantly and soon were standing by the rock against which Jim leaned with an easy grace. Mike and Lon, deserting their positions, walked over to look curiously at the bedraggled captives. "Is there anyone else in the cabin?" asked Jim.

A squat bushy haired man with a broken nose that gave his face an evil cast answered sullenly. "No. Ain't nobody left in there now."

"Mike, will you and Lon go over to the cabin and see if this ape tells the truth?" Jim's voice was pleasant but cynical.

The squat, thick cheeked man watched them until they had disappeared into the cabin. Then, with a quick glance at the unguarded split, he dove at Jim. There was a flashing glint in the morning sun and a dull splat as the stock of Jim's saddle gun hit him full in the face. He sagged to the ground. Jim, in one motion, had the unwinking muzzle pointed at the other man's shrinking belly.

"Where is Rod Grimes?" asked Jim. His voice was like ice, and his eyes seemed to burn into the bony man before him.

"I don't know where he is. I got nothin' to do with him," whined the man, shifting uneasily. His eyes flicked around constantly never steadying or settling.

The muzzle of Jim's gun jabbed and poked him solidly beneath the ribs. He gasped explosively and caught his stomach. "Tell me where he is, my friend, or I shall give you that ancient Mexican custom, the law of the fugitive," whispered Jim softly. "It would pain me to have to kill you while escaping."

"Don't kill me. I'll tell you," pleaded the man. "Rod's in town. He went in last night and said he'd drop by here this afternoon with some tobacco for us."

Quickly Jim stripped off the man's belt and trussed him up. Walking over to Auburn he said: "Keep an eye on this carrion, my golden one. I am going to town now. Have your father bring these men in and I will meet him there."

Auburn caught his arm and squeezed it tightly. "You're going to town after Grimes by yourself, aren't you?" You might be killed. I'm afraid. I won't let you go."

Kissing her lightly, Jim gently loosened her grasping fingers. "I'm in a hurry, little one. I'll see you in town. Now do as I say." Then he turned to Raphael who was seated against the boulder. "And how are you now?" he said in a worrying tone.

"Oh, I'm all right. The bullet hit me in the leg. It went in and out without touching a bone." Raphael shrugged deprecatingly. "Ten minutes with a doctor and I'll be as good as new. Now you'd better head for town and take care of the pig Grimes."

JIM turned and made his way through the crack with long rapid strides. As he came out into the box canyon he looked for the man they had left tied there but all that was left was a little heap of frayed ropes. He had escaped and was on his way to warn his boss, no doubt. Quickly Jim ran to the horses and mounting his buckskin spurred him into a ground-eating lope.

As he neared town, Jim saw two miles ahead of him the dust of a rider galloping into the main street. Spurring his horse, he followed at full speed. On the outskirts of the town he dismounted and made his way swiftly on foot to the front of the hotel. There at the hitching rack stood Raphael's roan. The little fellow had stolen a good horse to make the trip.

Slowly, hugging the building so that he would not be seen from inside, Jim walked

to the door of the hotel and stood alongside it with his back flat against the shrunken boards. From inside there came the buzz of conversation. Grimes' hard voice mingled with the sharp nasal tones of the escaped man. At last the talk stopped and Jim heard footsteps heading for the door. It swung open with an abrupt clatter and the little man stepped out importantly with a Colt shoved into his waistband. Looking neither right nor left he headed across the street. He was in the middle of the dusty road when Jim's quiet voice brought him to a sharp halt. "Drop your gun, my friend, and walk back here with your hands over your head."

There was a tense pause in which the man in the street seemed to sink slightly, his knees buckling a little. Then he screamed: "You go to hell," and with a jump to one side he whipped out his gun and began to fire.

Jim had waited expectantly for the jump. When it came he triggered two quick shots. The little man pitched heavily to the ground.

From inside the hotel there was the running clatter of heavy feet. Rod Grimes, his gun at full cock, broke out onto the shaded porch almost before the sound had stopped echoing. His quick eyes caught sight of his man stretched limply in the road and like the head of a striking snake his gun flicked in Jim's direction.

Without uttering a sound Jim squeezed the trigger of his already pointed Colt. It bucked reassuringly in his hand once, twice and then there was silence. Grimes sudden movement had come to a halt. The gun in his hand dropped laxly to his side and then fell to the floor with a clatter. He stood weaving uncertainly and at last dropped face forward with a crash. Only a shuddering nervous quiver of his foot showed that he was still alive. With a sudden nervous jerk it stopped.

It was an hour later when the little band of raiders, with their prisoners, rode into town. People came into the street and began shouting to them. By the time they reached the sheriff's office they had heard the story of the shooting over and over again. They had just reached the office when the door opened and Jim stepped out and waved at them with a smile.

At sight of him Auburn gave a little cry and leaping from her horse ran to him and threw herself into his arms. Sobbing and laughing she kissed him and over again and ran her hands over his cheeks and through his hair.

Jim slipped his arm around her and quickly swept her into the office and out the back door. "At least there is a little more privacy out here," he smiled. "You sure brought our courtship to a quick halt."

"What do you mean?" she asked pressing closer.

"Now that all those people saw you making love to me, we might as well get married right away." He kissed her. "Don't you agree, my little one?" She nodded contentedly.

A little later she looked up and asked in a puzzled way: "Why did Grimes keep all those horses? Why didn't he sell them?"

"He expected to buy Mike's ranch, little one. Once he owned the ranch and brand he could sell them without risk. He was being very clever." He grinned down at her. "By the way, it was a dumb trick you played in taking that first shot today back in the canyon. You may have got us all killed."

"It was not a dumb trick," she said stiffening, but with a voice still soft. "He might have blown your head off if I hadn't shot."

"Well after this don't save my life in that way. I don't like your kill or cure methods." He tried to kiss her but she moved her head and sputtered: "You bossy lout, just don't think you're going to play almighty after we're married. I'm as good as my man and that goes for you too."

Jim sat down and pulled her across his lap. "This," he said, is for talking back to me at the canyon, for shooting too soon and for being nasty now. We are going to be married tonight and by then you will know the boss." With that he began to spank her.

Inside Lon was talking to Mike. "You see how Auburn acted again," he said knowingly. "Like I told you, all girls are the same, when they're in love they act like they was helpless and like their men had two brains and could fly to the moon by flapping their arms."

JUMPIN' JUNIPER

By C. K. SHAW

Dehornin' the critter that stole Tiger Bell's necklace was no job for a bronky younker. Windy Bill Wicks tried to ignore the chills racin' up his spine as he forced his big nose in on the crazy deal.

EVEN WITH A MURDER AND A diamond robbery I might have had a chance if I could of got a toe hold. All the boys on the Bar H admit I've figured them out of lots of jams at odd times, but even a genius has to have somethin' on which to hang his thoughts. Me, Windy Bill Wicks, didn't have nothin', and besides I was in a strange town bein' crowded by a sheriff who I knew was plenty smart. I looked at Dick Muller, the kid me and my pard was tryin' to get to manhood ahead of the noose, and asked him a question I'd already asked him so many times I felt like a hoop snake rollin' down hill.

"How'd this murder start?"

"Just as I say, Windy!" he yips. "It started with the corpse of the bartender in the Rollin' Stone." The kid's eyes shifted like a caged cat's. "And the diamond robbery started when the necklace was jerked off this lady they call Tiger Bell, as she was playin' the piano."

"Them things I found out of the sheriff," I says. "I mean how did Simp Wells get mud on his boots, and what was he doin' with a eye-mask in his saddlepocket?"

"Anybody could a got mud on his boots!" Dick says, sweatin' marbles.

"The sheriff says it didn't rain 'til midnight here, and you say Simp Wells went to bed with you at ten. There shouldn't a been no mud on his boots." I was tough as an owl with the kid, for I had to get som'ers soon or all hell was goin' to pop. Dick Muller and Simp Wells, the Bar H bronk stomper who was only eighteen years old, had come on to this Idaho town a couple of days ahead of me, and when I'd arrived, I'd found Simp in jail charged with murder and robbery.

I made the kid look at me. "How come that eye-mask was in Simp's saddle pocket?"

"It was a plant!" Dick says desperate. "Windy, you got to get in that jail and talk with Simp and help him. You got to quit just settin' here like a knot on a log!"

When the kid was that lippy, I knew he was scared. "I'm goin' to continue settin'," I says reachin' slow for the makin's, "'till you open up with all you know. Beside the Sheriff won't let me near the jail."

"Try again Windy!"

"'Tain't no use. Sheriff Ballinger knows me, and he recollects that I've helped the Bar H boys outa the jug a few times."

"Then get yourself arrested," Dick says sullen. He was hipped over the idea of me talkin' with Simp Wells.

"Nothin' short of murder would make Ballinger arrest me," I says.

Dick perked up. "Murder?" he asks hopeful. "There's this Nuggets gent who claims he saw Simp runnin' away after the killin' last night. Now Windy if you kinda—"

"Murder is out," I says flat. "If Nuggets says he saw Simp, then I got to believe him 'til I see signs that point otherwise."

Dick slid off the narrow edge of the chair he'd been settin' on, like it had suddenly blistered him. "You mean you're goin' to set with your hands folded and let them frame Simp?"

"I calculate to set 'til you open your trap on a few things," I says back.

"Then I'll help Simp myself!" the kid yips.

"You start foolin' round that jail and you'll be sorry," I warned.

Dick's eyes got narrower and narrower. "Sheriff Ballinger ain't so smart or he wouldn't be took in like he is by all this stuff they've planted against Simp. I reckon I can dodge him without trouble."

"Hop to it," I says, drawin' a puff through my nose. "But don't come bellerin' to me if you get dehorned."

HOT under the collar, Dick started for the door, but just then the Sheriff come into the restaurant and he collared the kid and fetched him back to me. He asked what I'd found out.

"Nothin'," I told him, and I didn't blame Al Ballinger for the suspicious lamp he turned on me. Then he looked at Dick and saw his under lip stickin' out like an ol' shoe, and saw I wasn't slickerin' him.

"Sheriff," I says easy, "better let me in that jail for a talk with Simp Wells. Dick here seems afraid he'll say somethin' to hurt Simp, which is right noble, them bein' such good friends—"

"Nobody talks with this Simpson Wells," the Sheriff snaps.

"You mean that's plumb and teetotal?"

"That's teetotal as hell!" Al Ballinger barks and then he gets cagy. "Nor don't try to get yourself arrested Windy. I know your rep, and if you get to this Bar H man, you'll fix him up an alibi that a gnat couldn't crawl through. If you was to stick up the bank, I'd just set back and wait for you to fetch the money back."

I didn't like nobody bein' so plumb and teetotal with me. "I might steal a couple of them brood mares outa the Lyle corral," I says.

"Go ahead," he invites. "Go right ahead. Some of the fellers around town might get quick with the hemp, but you won't need to be afraid of gettin' arrested."

Dick's eyes got black as jet, and they was usual a dark bay. He started to snarl at the Sheriff, then buttoned up. He walked toward the door like a rod of iron was shoved down his back, and Ballinger

Despite Tiger Bell's screamin', the Sheriff was doin' a neat bit of indoor snake shootin'.

didn't stop him. He just watched, and when the kid was gone he told me he thought Dick was lyin' faster'n a dog could trot.

"And them lies is breedin' a scab on his nose," he ended up.

"He ain't mixed into it like you think," I says.

"Better brace yourself for a shock when this thing gets peeled all the way down," Ballinger tells me. "I know you've put in some hard knocks raisin' that kid, and I've heard he's done you proud, but he's some-

how mixed into this killin' and robbery."

"He's holdin' somethin' back," I agreed, "but when we get this peeled down like you say, we're goin' to find some extra special crooked work—and Simp and Dick are somehow the goats. Simp Wells ain't promise half as ornery as either you or me, Ballinger. He's above the common run. Who is this Nuggets gent that says he saw Simp runnin' away after the killin'?"

"A saddle-galled relic of a gambler that got sweet on Tiger Bell. Tiger Bell was a playin' and singin' at the piano when *wham! wham! wham!* them three shots come and nicked out the lamps."

"Simp Wells ain't that good a shot," I says. "He's putrid."

The Sheriff went right on. "The diamonds was yanked off Tiger Bell's neck after the lights was shot out, the till was robbed, and then in three shakes of a dead lamb's tail a fourth shot come. That was when the bartender got his. Tried to stop the thief I reckon."

"This is just hearsay, ain't it?"

"'Twasn't hearsay that Simp Wells had mud on his boots and an eyemask in his saddle pocket."

"There was some awful fast work in that deal," I says. "You say one shake after the lamps was shot out, the barkeep was killed. Sheriff, the thief had to come in from the outside, after havin' made them three dead center shots, which fancy shootin' Simp never could have done—but we'll pass that for now. The thief had to come into the dark room, get to the piano and grab off them diamonds, get to the till and kill a barkeep all in not more than two shakes. 'Tain't possible. And sheriff, I've caught a glance of this Tiger Bell, and she ain't no gentle Annie. If a greenhorn like Simp had of tried to get them diamonds off her neck, she'd a clawed him from hell to breakfast."

"You've got points there, Windy," the Sheriff admitted. "The timin' on this job is crazy, complete and teetotal. And several other things don't jibe. But it would help if we'd say, well, that this kid of yours was hid inside the Rollin' Stone, near the piano, and when the shots come, jumped for the diamonds, 'fore Tiger Bell could get her claws out. That'd leave Simp Wells for the till and Barkeep job."

My dander lifted at this cold-blooded charge, but I knew this was no time for me to get myself insulted. "Dick and Simp ain't mixed into it the way you think," I said, "but I'll work with you the same as if I thought they was—tolerably the same. So Nuggets was Tiger Bell's gentleman friend, huh?"

"'Till yesterday he was. Tiger Bell was quittin' him."

"How come a lady piano player at the Rollin' Stone had real diamonds?"

"Tiger Bell's sister, the Gold Canary, was givin' them to her if she'd quit playin' in a gamblin' house and start bein' a fancy lady. The Gold Canary sings at the best places in Frisco and the miners fight for a chance to empty their dust into her lap. Tiger Bell was goin' with her sister, but she played one last time at the Rollin' Stone for ol' time's sake, and wore the diamonds."

"So the Gold Canary and Nuggets ain't nothin' but enemies," I says, feelin' a hunch ticklin' the back on my neck.

"Teetotal enemies," the Sheriff barked.

"Since Tiger Bell has lost her diamonds, is she still goin' away?"

The Sheriff frowned. "Tiger Bell and the Gold Canary is very poor friends this mornin', 'cause the Canary says Tiger was careless."

"Nuggets mighta planned this deal to get himself rich, and to try and keep Tiger Bell."

"He might of," the Sheriff admitted as though he'd figured that angle before. "He was outside of the saloon he says at the time of the killin'. But Windy, when you said the thief had to have a helper, you was dead right. Now since this mud on Simp Wells' boots, I figure Simp was the helper, and Nuggets has now sold him out. But then I can't figure why Simp won't talk unless he's tryin' to save some third man that was into the deal. Some good friend of his."

"Sheriff, ain't you never goin' to look beyond Simp Wells?"

"I'm plumb open-minded," he said. "I don't want to whitewash nobody, nor tar 'em neither. Nuggets ain't left no sign I've so far struck."

WE HAD a cup of coffee and done some more talkin'. We was on our third cup when the door flew open and in

sailed the Gold Canary, Tiger Bell and Nuggets. The lady singer looked more like a fat robin than a canary, and Nuggets was tall and sallow, near the color of the gold he wore in his tie pin and cuff links. Tiger Bell was one of them bosomy ladies who looks so good in big hats with bobbin' plumes. The Gold Canary was screechin' like a magpie that she'd been bitter insulted. Bitter, terrific and complete.

The Sheriff saw the insult was connected with a piece of paper she was wavin', and finally got the paper away. It was a ransom note and said if three-hundred dollars was left at the juniper tree on the hillside near town 'fore midnight, the diamonds would be left when the money was took.

It was on account of such a small ransom price that the Gold Canary was insulted. She kept sayin' it like a parrot.

"Maybe you've been overestimatin' them diamonds to us," Nuggets says to the Canary. "Maybe they're paste."

This didn't help oil things down any. Me and the Sheriff give the note a careful eye, and he wanted to know if I'd ever seen the printin' before.

"It's been done crazy," I says, "likely with the left hand. I ain't never seen nothin' like it." And I hadn't, but I did know where the paper had come from that the note was wrote on. It was out of a little pocket tally book that I'd give Dick a short time back. My stomach faded away 'til I could feel my belt buckle rubbin' my backbone. Dick come a chargin' in about then and the Sheriff didn't notice I'd gone green. The kid caught on fast to what had happened.

"Ransom note!" Dick says pleased. "Now Sheriff, you'll have to turn Simp Wells loose. He couldn't a wrote this and put it under the Gold Canary's door."

"But his pard could of," the Sheriff says, pinnin' Dick down with a look that fair busted him out with a rash. Dick lost all his pleasure over the note. He blinked as the Canary started to screech again about bein' insulted.

"Wasn't three-hundred enough to ask?" Dick says.

Nuggets laughed so loud Tiger Bell nudged him to shut up. Nuggets then said when the ransom money was left at the juniper tree, he wanted to go along. The Gold Canary wasn't so insulted she wasn't goin' to send the three-hundred, and I was steppin' sly as a lynx on the whole deal. I knew it'd do no good for me to charge Dick with writin' that note, and it could do a lot of harm. The chills was overlappin' in a race up my spine as we went to plannin' for leavin' the money at the juniper and trappin' the thief when he come to get the dough.

Dick was steppin' high again, sayin' that now we'd get the thief and Simp would be free. The Sheriff said both Dick and Nuggets could go along when he went with the money, and I saw he was anxious to keep them both under his eye. Dick asked if him and me couldn't take the money to the juniper, for the Sheriff had said two could take the money and two stay back to watch for any double-crossin' move on the part of the thief.

"Maybe the thief is waitin' to kill whoever takes that money to the juniper," Nuggets says.

"Me and Windy ain't afraid," Dick says. "We want to do that for Simp Wells."

Nothin' was fittin' into the picture for me, and I saw by the droopy blood-hound look on the Sheriff's face that he was stuck too. He whispered to me when he got a chance that the whole thing was batty. He said that juniper was on the side of a bare hill and nobody with half sense would have picked that spot.

By the time it was dark and we was ready to leave for the juniper tree with the money, Nuggets had cooled off on the idea of goin' along. He said leavin' the money was just a lot of rot. Nobody would come for it, with the moon as bright as it was, and he then hinted somebody was makin' a fool out of the Sheriff. The Sheriff sniffed like he smelled a track, and said we'd play the string out.

The four of us started for the juniper, for when Nuggets saw the Sheriff was suspicious over him a gettin' so lukewarm, he whipped up. The Sheriff was impressed by Dick's deep interest, but I knew the kid was playin' some game. I even watched to see if him and Nuggets was workin' together. I kept askin' myself how Dick figured leavin' this money was goin' to help. I kept askin', but I couldn't figure no answer. I fed the kid plenty of rope, pre-

tendin' to believe everything, and watched sharp as a hawk.

THE Sheriff and Nuggets settled down in some boulders a considerable distance back from the juniper tree, and me and Dick got ready to go with the money. From the boulders to the tree was clear ground. Nobody could get to the tree or leave without the Sheriff seein' him. Not even a gopher, for the moon was bright as a new dollar. Nuggets was a little nervous. He pointed out again that only a half-wit would select a spot like that juniper tree.

The sheriff give me the envelope with the money in it, and reminded me that the killer we was after was a fancy shot. "Three lights nicked in three fast shots," he said. "But I can't see no reason he'd have now for killin' you," he said generous.

If I hadn't of known Dick was into the thing clean up to his ornery neck, I'd a made him stay back with the Sheriff just in case a gun battle did open. He pranced out ahead of me toward the juniper, a screwin' his head four ways almost at once, as though he was terrible anxious not to miss seein' the thief. I kept a watch too, for I knew the whole deal was a jump ahead of me.

We got to the juniper and Dick lifted up a rock for me to put the envelope under it. In the note it had said to put the money under a rock. He was still screwin' his neck around as he knelt a holdin' the rock up. I put the envelope down. Dick caught his breath nervous and pointed down the hill.

"That's just a bird," I says.

He let the rock fall and got up from his knees. "When that money is come for, we'll have the murderer," he says.

"Nobody is goin' to be fool enough to come for this money," I snaps. "Al Ballinger ain't fooled none by all this horseplay —and neither am I."

Dick almost stopped dead in his tracks. We was walkin' now back to the boulder. "Windy," he says fast, for we was now close. "If we don't get the killer this way, then you've got to get in that jail and talk with Simp."

I didn't answer. When we got back to the Sheriff and Nuggets we settled down to wait. Nuggets soon got tired and jumpy. The Sheriff wouldn't let nobody smoke, so the time passed slow. Dick curled up on the ground between me and the Sheriff for a nap, and said to wake him the minute we saw the killer a comin' for the money.

After another hour, the Sheriff told Nuggets he could go back to town if he went real quiet and careful. Nuggets took off and the Sheriff told me he had a deputy stationed close to follow anybody who left. That was just how much ol' Ballinger was on his toes. Dick talked some in his sleep, or it was more like gruntin', and once sat up stiff and grabbed the Sheriff like he was dreamin' of bein' chased. I had to shake the kid to get him to turn loose of Ballinger. He woke up then and asked where Nuggets was and was terrible excited to hear he was gone to town.

"He's goin' to wait 'til we get tired of watchin', then sneak up and get that three-hundred," the kid says. "We wont never get tired, will we Windy?"

"Come mornin'," the Sheriff growled, "if nobody has come for that dough, I'm takin' it back to the Canary."

Come mornin', we wasn't no wiser than we'd been all durin' the night, so the Sheriff said we'd get the money and go to town. We had cramps from settin' on the ground and was sour in general. I could of skun Dick Muller alive as I tramped with Ballinger to the juniper tree. I was gettin' wore to the bone with his tricks.

The country around the juniper was bare as the palm of your hand, and we didn't even bother to look for tracks. We knew nobody had been near that money. I lifted the rock so's the Sheriff could get the envelope holdin' the money, and my eye popped out of my head and back again like they was on rubber bands. The envelope was gone!

For a second my thoughts spun like a top, then I tried to snake one out that wasn't as dizzy as the rest. I'd put that money under the rock, and Dick had been kneelin' down close to it. He'd grabbed it out—had to be the way for nobody had come and gone durin' the night.

About this time the Sheriff got his stampeded brains to millin', and he jammed a gun into my ribs. "Paw the sky!" he orders.

I dropped the rock I had still held and just stood. The deputy that had been stationed towards town come ridin' up, and

he slapped down on me too. I hoisted my mitts and the deputy took my gun.

"Easy," I says to myself, "easy Windy! You're steppin' on thin ice and she's crackin' on you." Dick was rollin' his eyes like a dyin' calf and got down on his knees and looked under the rock again for the money.

"Me and Windy left it there," he tells the Sheriff. "It couldn't a got away!"

The deputy searched me for the envelope and the Sheriff kept his gun on my brisket. There wasn't no envelope. Then they searched Dick. I was a figurin' fast what to do when they found it on the kid —but they didn't find it. But the Sheriff did find that old tally book I'd give the kid, and his eyes got sharp as tacks. I saw he recognized immediate that paper as the same on which the ransom note had been wrote.

Al Ballinger hadn't toted a star all these years for nothin'.

"Where'd you get this?" he asked.

"Windy give it to me," Dick answers prompt.

"When?"

"A few days ago. I saw him usin' the paper for to roll his smokes, and asked him for it. He tore out a few leaves and give me the book."

That took the rag off the bush. The kid was lyin' cold turkey. He had everything fixed, he knew the Sheriff would figure I'd used one of these pages I'd tore out. If that gun hadn't of been talkin' to my gizzard so hard, I'd a grabbed that kid and shook him 'til his teeth rattled out.

There was a general search after this from the tree to the boulders, and all around the boulders. That envelope wasn't hid nowhere. The Sheriff decided it wasn't no use holdin' the hardware on me no longer, so told the deputy to just keep a close eye on me. I walked over and grabbed Dick by the collar and stood him against the tree.

"Where's that money?" I asked.

"Windy!" he yips, "don't lay it onto me!"

That done it. The Sheriff said he saw the whole plot. Instead of me just a comin' to town after the robbery like I'd claimed, I'd sneaked in the night before and helped Simp and Dick with the whole job. Dick looked scared.

"You won't arrest Windy, will you?" Dick asked.

"Won't I?" the Sheriff bellered. "I'll slap him in the other cell right across from Simp Wells!"

Dick looked up at me—*and winked.*

My stomach caved in and I got a brassy taste in my mouth. The kid had gone to all this trouble to get me in jail so's I could talk with Simp Wells. He'd got me charged with the murder of that barkeep, and the stealin' of them diamonds. I could see he was plumb proud of himself.

On the way to town and jail, I kept askin' myself what the kid had done with the money. I hadn't tried to tell the Sheriff what Dick was up to, for things was twisted enough as they was. But what had happened to them three-hundred berries? I got sick to my stomach when I thought there wasn't no rock left unturned no place on that hillside. I got sick to my stomach when I thought that the kid could have slipped the envelope to Nuggets. If it hadn't of been for that wink, I'd a thought the money had a took wings and flew off.

I WAS locked in the cell across from Simp Wells and Simp said he was sure glad to see me. He was low as a snake in a wheeltrack, but company perked him up. Or it did 'til I told him about the ransom money. We had to whisper so's nobody would hear us, and whenever I asked Simp somethin' he didn't want to answer, he pretended not to hear. He wouldn't talk no more than Dick. He kept askin' me what the kid had told me, and when I said nothin', he was shocked. He said he didn't steal the diamonds or kill the barkeep. He said he didn't know how the mud got on his boots, and I knew he was lyin'. Purty soon he got in a far corner of his cell and covered his face with his hands and wouldn't say another word.

The Sheriff come back sayin' he'd been to search my saddle and hadn't found the diamonds. "Where are they?" he snarled. "And how did you manage to return that ransom money to the Canary?"

"Was it returned?" I asked, meek as a lamb. "Was it, honest?"

"Sure!" Dick yips, "and now you got to turn Windy loose, 'cause you know he didn't take it."

"But he wrote the note," the Sheriff snaps. "Windy Wicks is charged with murder!"

The Sheriff was trampin' around and Dick kept a sidlin' closer to my cell. Him and Al Ballinger had been somewheres around town for several hours, and I could see somethin' had happened. Dick got his chance and whispered to me.

"I've got the diamonds!"

I just leaned on the bars of my door. My voice was gone, likewise my stomach, and my heart was chokin' me. I couldn't even whisper.

"I'll give them to the Gold Canary and collect the reward," Dick goes on fast. "That will prove you and Simp ain't guilty and—"

"Don't do nothin' 'till I'm out of here!" I managed to whisper. "If the Sheriff finds out you've got them diamonds, he'll hang us all three!"

That scared Dick. "You mean—?" he started. "Windy, you mean he'd think *we* killed that barkeep?"

I didn't get time to answer, for the Sheriff come stormin' back and told Dick to get out of the jail.

"You got to let Windy Bill out!" the kid says low and scared.

Al Ballinger laughed. "Nothin' short of dynamite will get him out!"

Dick's eyes rolled like when he gets an idea. "Dynamite?" he says.

I just set collapsed after they'd left. I was already charged with murder and stealin' a diamond necklace, now Dick was out huntin' dynamite for to blow up the jail.

I tried to get Simp to talk, and he wouldn't peep. After a long time the Sheriff come back and he tried to get me to tell where I'd hid the diamonds. He said the Gold Canary was drivin' him crazy, and that if he didn't get them rocks, he'd get beat in the next election. I asked him if he thought I was happy over the business.

"Windy, there's still something plumb and teetotal crazy about this deal," he said. "Sometimes I think I'd do better to put that kid of yours in jail and let you out. He's sudden got an awful interest in Nuggets, and what do you reckon he could want with dynamite? I heard he was askin' for some."

Then the blast come! The jail lifted up at its right front corner, twisted and snapped and a couple of sizeable rocks busted in through the roof. Then that front corner settled down into a hole so deep the chairs and table went skiddin'. The Sheriff had jumped up and he went skiddin' with the table and somehow got under it. My head cracked against the iron bars, but I still saw Dick come a leapin' into the jail, pile a couple of extra chairs on the table holdin' the Sheriff down, and then jump for the key to the cells. He knew which nail it hung on.

The kid got my door unlocked fast, but Simp's was twisted so we had to leave him in, for the Sheriff was beginnin' to kick from under the table. Me and Dick went out of that jail like two shots. We got to the liverystable and hid in the haymow, safe for a while 'cause everybody was at the jail.

"I must of used too much dynamite," Dick whispered. "I took the powder out so's not to hurt nobody, and crammed some paper in on top, but it was a purty big blast."

"Yeah," I says. "The Sheriff will think so. Now get to talkin', tell everything!"

"Sure, Windy, now I know Simp didn't have a thing to do with it. Tiger Bell and Nuggets planned everything, only the barkeeper got in Nuggets way and had to be bumped off. Then Nuggets hid a mask in Simp's saddle pocket, for he'd seen Simp runnin' away after the shootin'." Dick sighed. "I thought that ransom note would be fine to get you into jail, but it, well it kind of got us in deep water."

Then the kid told how he'd took the envelope with the money when he pointed down the hill to call my attention to a bird. Then when he'd preteneded to have a bad dream, he hid the envelope in the Sheriff's coat pocket. After the searching was all over, he'd managed to get it back. Then he'd sneaked down to Tiger Bell's house thinking to shove the envelope under her door, and thus get the money back to the Gold Canary. When he sneaked up, he heard Tiger Bell and Nuggets talking about the deal they had pulled.

"Tiger Bell took them diamonds off herself, and dropped them in the rain barrel outside the back door," Dick whispered. "They was both scared after the barkeep

had got killed, and so hadn't got the diamonds out of the barrel yet. They was tryin' to figure out who'd wrote the ransom note. I went to the rainbarrel and got the diamonds, then I took the three-hundred to the door of the Gold Canary. I thought I better get rid of that money 'fore I was caught with it."

HE WAS plumb pleased with himself. "Now all we got to do is give the diamonds back and tell who killed the barkeep," he says. "You should of let me do that without blowin' up the jail."

When I told him Tiger Bell and Nuggets would deny everything, and we'd be left charged with murder, he caught on and got scared again.

"You do the thinkin' from here on out, Windy," he says. "I'm tired out with plannin'."

"Yeah," I says quick, "you take a rest. Let me handle it." I'd been thinkin' as the kid talked, and I recalled the Sheriff sayin' there was another girl that played and sung in the Rollin' Stone, named Ruby Dale. He said 'fore Tiger Bell had come, Nuggets had been sweet on Ruby. I took a long chance and started for the house where Dick said Tiger Bell lived. I left the kid behind to warn me if the Sheriff got too close.

I took time to find out Nuggets had left, so I knocked on Tiger Bell's door. When she come to see who it was, she had her hat on with big plumes wavin' around.

"Well Romeo," she says, "I thought you was in jail."

I told her I'd busted out after the explosion. "Nuggets is givin' you the double-cross," I says blunt, for I had to hurry. "He's took them diamonds out of the rainbarrel and give them to Miss Ruby Dale."

Tiger Bell got pale. "I don't know what you're talkin' about!" she says, dumb as a fox. "Have they found my sister's diamonds?"

I talked straight from the shoulder. Told

ANOTHER TORCH OF LIBERTY

American Sports with its spirit of cooperation play an important part in Our American Heritage. The building of youth's spirit and body is a contribution which American Sports have always made to the American form of life.

her the Sheriff was after me and that I'd hang if Nuggets got out of town with the diamonds. "Him and Ruby Dale have left to get married," I threw in for good measure.

That turned her green. I told her I'd heard of the diamonds when Nuggets told Ruby Dale about them and how fine she'd look in them. That made the Tiger wild. She whipped a gun from the low front of her dress and said she was goin' to kill me. I told her I was just there to help get the diamonds back for her sister. The gun got wobbly and I talked her into comin' to the rainbarrel with me.

She was suspicious of me, but she knew I wasn't lyin' about where the diamonds had been hid. She stuck her bare arm into the barrel and didn't find no diamonds. She decided to kill me again 'cause she said I'd stole them. I told her she'd better get the Sheriff started after Nuggets and Lily Dale and the diamonds.

She shoved the gun away. "That's what I'll do!" she yells. "Ruby Dale don't get my diamonds—nor my man!"

We went to the jail and Dick hustled for the Sheriff. I'd got the Tiger to loan me her gun so's we could make the Sheriff listen to us, and felt a lot better. The Sheriff come, and after he cooled down at seein' me back in the half-wrecked jail, he listened to the Tiger's story. She said Nuggets talked her into lettin' on like the diamonds had been stole. Then the barkeep had been killed and things got hot. Now she wanted Nuggets hanged by the neck!

The deputy went out and was soon back with Nuggets. Tiger Bell made a lunge at him screamin' she would choke him. He was tremblin' like a leaf.

"They've tricked you, Bell!" he yelled. "You've ruined us both!"

They hurried Nuggets into a cell. Tiger Bell was blinkin' kinda stunned, then she saw me hand over the diamonds to the Sheriff. I was glad then I'd got her gun away. But she yanked a hatpin a foot long out of her plumed hat and come for me. I couldn't trip a lady, nor I couldn't hang one on her jaw. I dodged two jabs. She was stabbin' for my face. The sheriff was yellin' for her to stop, but he couldn't up and drill a lady neither.

Then Dick makes a dive at her and lets out a shrill yip. "Snakes!" he bellers. "Snakes!"

Tiger Bell dropped the hatpin and clawed over her shoulder at the low back of her dress. She started to climb the wall like a wild woman, then fell back. She kept a clawin' and screechin' and when it seemed she would turn clean out of her skin, she come up with a foot long snake. She threw it and it went straight for the Sheriff. He lept sideways and done a fancy job of shootin', makin' that snake do a dance as he poured lead into it. Then we both saw it wasn't a snake, but a piece of wet rawhide.

Tiger Bell was still dazed, so we got her into a cell. With all the yellin' and shootin' folks started to come to the jail, and along with the rest come the Gold Canary. She was so tickled at gettin' her diamonds back that she said she wasn't even mad at her sister for stealin' them, and that she didn't want Tiger Bell kept in jail.

Simp and me and Dick got things straightened out with the Sheriff. Simp said the night of the killin', he had gone to bed at ten, and not bein' able to sleep, had got up and went around town. Dick had then woke up and dressed and gone to look for Simp. Simp come home and found the kid gone, so went back out. Dick then come home and went to bed. But next mornin', both was afraid the other had got mixed into the diamond robbery, and so neither of them would talk and say the other had been gone.

The Sheriff was mad about his jail bein' blowed up at one corner, so took all the reward money the Gold Canary had paid Dick for recoverin' her diamonds, for fixin' it. He said if I ever come back to town, not to fetch the kid. Though he did say that was a smart trick Dick pulled with the wet rawhide.

"How'd you come by that wet rawhide?" I asked the kid.

He said it was some he had for putting a new chinstrap on his bridle, and that it had fallen in the rainbarrel while he was trying to fish the diamonds out.

"The Sheriff shot it full of holes," Dick said.

Al Ballinger give Dick a new chinstrap, but he still didn't say nothin' about the kid ever comin' back to visit him.

Donlan lined on the bulky owlhooter and triggered.

WOLF-MEAN

By OCIE FRASER

There's a place for the law and a place for the outlaw, reckoned owlhooter Jim Donlan. And showdown trail ain't no place for Mr. Tin-star when gun-swifts are tallying fued-debts.

FROM the half-shadows near the stove where the yellow flare of the oil lamp failed to completely push back the darkness, the outlawed Jim Donlan carefully studied the lean stranger seated at the table.

Offhand, the man was no different from the average rider who popped brush along

the Rio Grande—tall, sunbaked, with alert gray eyes that were constantly moving. But Donlan saw more than that; or rather he felt the wolf-keenness of the man, the sharp and searching instinct within him. Five years along the shadowy trails where he constantly gambled his freedom against his own keenness had made of Jim Donlan a fox at scenting trouble. Growing suspicion was becoming a certainty. Here was no ordinary line-rider or border-jumping renegade. Donlan would have gambled high stakes that pinned somewhere inside the man's faded flannel shirt was the glistening star of the Texas Rangers.

Donlan refilled his own cup and quietly waited for the man to talk.

With a brief "Thanks," the man shoved his cup across the table, and his eyes came up to clash fleetingly with Donlan's. He had arrived at Donlan's lonely sheep camp at dusk on a leg-weary sorrel and introduced himself as Jeff Grant, a drifting rider.

Darkness was settling over the desert now, and they had finished sharing a simple meal.

Donlan refilled his own cup, resumed his seat and quietly waited for the man to talk.

"Big country 'round here. Been ridin' upriver for three days without seein' anybody. Must get pretty lonesome?"

"I don't mind."

Grant toyed with his cup, musing idly. "Been herdin' sheep long, Donlan?"

Donlan thought of many silent, bitter months along the river, and muttered grimly: "A long time." He hated the smell of sheep as much as any other cowboy who had been raised on the trail of the Texas longhorns. But with a price on his head he had learned to sacrifice much for the loneliness and safety of the solitudes.

"Can't recall your name, pard. Funny. But I've met you some place." Grant glanced sharply at Donlan. "Out 'round 'Paso, perhaps?"

"Maybe."

Grant didn't appear satisfied. He placed his hard gaze squarely against Donlan. "Somehow you don't strike me as a typical sheepherder, Donlan."

"No?" Donlan's voice was cool, easy. But inside he was afire. He met the searching gray eyes steadily and tried to guess at how much the man knew. He caught no flicker of warning; but then the man was a wolf at caution.

Finally, Grant shrugged, slowly got to his feet. Idly, he fished out tobacco and papers and made himself a cigarette. He moved over to the stove and lighted it. Then, as if suddenly remembering his host, he swung around and offered the makings to Donlan.

Donlan was on his feet. He extended his right hand for the tobacco and had almost grasped it when he caught the sudden break in the hard gray eyes. Grant was in action, moving swiftly in, his left hand stabbing for Donlan's gun. He was fast, smooth as oil. Donlan clenched his right hand, moved it upward a few inches in a hard fist against Grant's throat. The man grunted explosively and crashed sideways into the table, sputtering.

DRAWING his gun, Donlan stepped back and quietly waited for him to recover. Grant slowly righted himself, rubbing his injured throat. He saw the steady gun, and over it, Donlan's frosty eyes.

"You're a Ranger, Grant?" Donlan's speech was accusing.

"Yes." He flicked his eyes downward. "Inside my shirt—my badge."

"Show it." Donlan snapped his gun forward a few inches. "But first, drop that gun-belt, easy."

Grant unbuckled the belt and let it fall. With a side movement of his foot he skidded it halfway across the room. A hand went inside his shirt, fumbled briefly, and came out with the shiny star.

Grant was speaking quietly. "I finally remembered you, Donlan. You're that kid partner of Bill Hawlitt's who was caught with stolen horses and sentenced to ten years in prison. Only you were Jim Bradley then. Slugged your guard and got away." His tone softened a little. "So you've been huggin' the river these five long years? Herdin' sheep?"

"I've been lookin' for Hawlitt."

"Oh? More horse deals, I suppose?"

Donlan started to explain, but a wave of bitterness at justice surged through him, turning his face granite-hard. He motioned the Ranger to a chair.

"I'm tyin' you up, Grant, to hold you for a coupla hours. Then I'm headin' south. I'll cross the river this time. But someday I'll be back—with Bill Hawlitt!"

The Ranger was quietly holding his hands behind the chair to be bound. He said: "Funny. I didn't come here manhuntin' you, Donlan. Horses are bein' run acrost the Border west of here. Had a tip Hawlitt was behind it."

Donlan ignored the probing. He gathered his few belongings into a small pack. From the doorway, he turned to the Ranger and said tonelessly, "I'll be crossin' the river at dawn, so you needn't bother to follow."

Donlan headed south into the soft desert night. A light breeze was stirring, sifting the sand, rattling the dead mesquite branches until they were like ghostly whisperings. Dark and ugly memories rode with him. So this was just another repetition of the many times when the law had forced him to seek for deeper shadows along the owlhoot trail?

He recalled his old stamping ground far to the north along the edge of the Staked Plains, and the sad day when, drifting across country between jobs, he had hired out to a stranger trail-herding a dozen head of horses. That night their camp was stormed by a sheriff's posse, grim-faced men with ready guns. Donlan had gone to jail; but the cunning Bill Hawlitt had vanished into the night.

At the time of the arrest, Donlan had given the assumed name of Jim Bradley, and during the quick trial he had not found much reason or opportunity to establish his real name. Instead of the usual rope, a kindly judge had let him off with ten years in prison. But Donlan never even started that sentence. Watching his chance, he slugged his guard, and fled.

Westward, in the heart of the Cristos Mountains, he had found comparative safety among the Mexican sheepmen. He had become a herder of sheep; a watcher of lonely camp fires. But always he kept his ear to the ground, listening to outlaw rustlings that would finally bring him news of Bill Hawlitt. His bitterness against the big renegade was like a raw wound, something that could not be healed until he had tracked down the man and turned him over to the law—and made him talk.

Gradually Donlan had worked down the river, back into Texas, ever following elusive rumors. Hawlitt clung to the fringes of the settlements. And here on the Border, the wildest and roughest of the frontiers, Donlan felt that he would finally corner the wily horse-thief.

A FEW miles south of the sheep camp, Donlan ran into a wide stretch of broken red lava rock. He left no trail here, so he turned west, paralleling the river which was still fifteen miles distant. A couple of Mexicans were running a flock of sheep near the foot of Apache Butte, part of the same outfit that Donlan worked for, and he wanted to send one of them over to his camp to stay until the owner could send out a new herder.

Even in moonlight, the broken lava beds made extremely rough going. It was past midnight when Donlan reached the Mexicans' camp. Knowing the disturbance the dogs would make at his approach, he rolled in his blankets some distance away from the camp and slept until daylight.

He had breakfast with the herders, and then spoke quietly to Juan. "I left a Ranger tied up back there in my cabin. If you happen to see him, tell him that I've gone across the river."

"Si, senor." And as Donlan stepped to the saddle, he added softly, "Vaya con Dios, mi amigo!"

The sun came up to make a fiery ball in the sky as Donlan threaded his way southward through a maze of crumbling rocks and broken buttes.

Shortly after noon, in the shadow of a crumbling ledge, he ran across a sink-hole of bitter alkaline water. He slipped the saddle and spread his own blanket in a mesquite's spotty shade. The sun was advancing far westward when he stepped to the saddle again.

There was not even the slightest warning of danger. A man rode around the corner of the ledge, the hoofs of his walking horse muffled by sand. He must have been as surprised as Donlan, for he savagely close-hauled his horse and flung him half around, his hand hovering over a dark-butted gun.

Donlan's hand had flashed to his own gun, but as the man did not continue in his hostile act, he let some of the tension

drain away and flung out a curt "Howdy."

With a coarse grunt, the man relaxed and reined his horse forward. Donlan took quick measurement—scaly as a desert rattlesnake, and wolf-mean. He sat slouched in the saddle, but that did not conceal his lean length. His long face was bony, his nose flaring and predatory, and his skin was seamed like parched leather. But it was the livid scar across his face that had taken away one eye in its path which left the touch of revulsion. The other eye, small and beady, glittered a pale amber from its recessed cradle.

"Guess we're both a mite jumpy, friend," he said guardedly.

Deep inside Donlan, something snapped. *Bill Hawlitt!* Savageness stirred and raced through him like wildfire. No matter how the rough and bloody battles and wanton excesses scarred Hawlitt's face, he would never forget that rasping voice. Tension drew him iron-hard and a vast hatred scored through him as he set himself to make his play against the owlhooter.

But even as Donlan's hand poised above his gun, two more horses rounded the shoulder of the ledge. In the lead rode a sallow-faced kid, excitement burning in his eyes, hand on holstered six-gun. Behind him came a squat Mexican, swarthy and pock-marked. A saddle-gun rested across his lap.

"This water ain't pizen?" Hawlitt's sandpaper croaking cut through Donlan's deadly tension.

Stabbing caution brought Donlan's hands forward to rest on his saddle horn. "No," he said acidly. "Not the water."

Curiosity, and danger, was in the green-glinting eye that Hawlitt fixed upon him. Donlan neck-reined his horse. "I'm ridin'," he announced curtly. He swung out among the boulders, feeling Hawlitt's gaze boring into his back, and expecting bullets to rock him from the saddle. He had to get away before the outlaw got his wits together enough to remember him; had to play for time until he could get them separated, or at least into a position where he could fight them on more equal terms. He didn't want to kill Hawlitt, he wanted the man to talk. He alone could clear Donlan of the horse-stealing charge.

Donlan rode west until he was well away from the sink-hole, then he climbed a ledge and waited. It was not long until his guess that the hombres would ride on toward the river was proven correct. He waited until they were long out of sight and then took a course paralleling theirs, moving slowly and warily.

The sun had sunk and night was drawing a curtain of blackness over the desert when Donlan came out on a high bluff overhanging the river. He had just decided to withdraw and make a dry camp until daylight, when a rapid fusillade of gunfire jarred against the night stillness. The firing ended as abruptly as it had started.

He calculated the shots had come from perhaps a half-mile downriver. Keeping well away from the river, he moved rapidly in that direction. He had not gone far when he spotted a blob of light. The sweat of excitement pricked his skin and his hand brushed often against the heavy gun on his hip as he stalked that patch of light. He soon decided that it was pouring from the open doorway of a cabin.

Stealthily he moved forward to a willow clump a scant fifteen feet from the light's source.

THE building was a weathered and crumbling adobe shack. The light came from a sputtering candle jammed into the neck of an empty whiskey bottle. Hawlitt and the frog-like Mexican sat at a packing-box table with a greasy deck of cards between them, and an uncorked jug of tequila passing freely back and forth. Donlan could see the cold-faced kid sprawled against the opposite wall, the flame of the candle throwing flickering shadows across his face, distorting it into a sinister mask.

Suddenly Hawlitt turned his head over his shoulder and laughed loudly, brutally. "So the fearless Ranger has tracked me down again?" He burst into a violent torrent of cursing, lunged to his feet. He was facing down the room, into the corner where Donlan could not see. "You gave me this with a bullet—" he pointed to the horrible scar across his face—"more than two years ago. I ain't fergittin'. Tonight I'm payin' yuh back—double!"

He swung back and seized the jug of tequila, planted his feet wide, tilted the jug and drank thirstily. The fiery liquid

was unleashing the red devils within him, pricking his warped brain into a roaring hell of hate and blood-lust. He reached up and took a bullwhip from the wall and tested it with a vicious swing that brought a report like a rifle shot. Then he glared over the jug at the grinning Mexican.

"Suppose yuh show him a littl' fancy knife-work first, Pinto."

Donlan saw the pock-marked Pinto lurch to his feet, smoothly snake a wicked double-edged knife from between his shoulder-blades. In the same motion he flung the sticker across the room with terrific force. Through the narrow doorway, Donlan's range of vision was not broad enough to permit him to see the target, but he heard the knife bite deeply into wood. The squat Mexican hopped forward to recover it, an evil leer splitting his heavy lips.

Donlan's brain was whirling. Undoubtedly, the outlaws had turned the score on Ranger Grant, and were now satisfying a little of their vindictive hatred for the law before killing the man and feeding his body to the hungry yellow quicksands of the Rio Grande. He had to make sure, know for a certainty where every card was stacked.

Just above the lounging kid, an old steer hide was nailed to the wall; across the only window, Donlan guessed. Earlier, he had seen a splotch of light leaking from that side of the adobe. But to approach that spot meant that he would have to run the risk of alarming the horses which were tethered close by. However, time was pressing. He decided to take the gamble.

A bright moon had cleared the eastern skyline, laying a pale light upon the desert. Donlan moved swiftly, circling the adobe and coming in from the rear. A big sorrel, Grant's mount, tossed its head as he made a dark shadow against the adobe's wall. Donlan found the splash of light, lifted his eyes to the slit.

Directly across the room, the cat-grinning Pinto was hugging the tequila jug, excitement flaking from his yellowish animal eyes. Donlan searched for Hawlitt, remembering that the kid's position was out of his range of vision. In the center of the room, back near the doorway, Hawlitt stood coiling the long bullwhip.

Hawlitt's thick voice jarred the tension. "Beg, Ranger!"

Swiftly, Donlan shifted his gaze to the other end of the room. Grant was standing erect against a large wooden roof support, bound securely, his hands drawn above his head. Pinto's double-edge knife was embedded in the post, just above his head. But Donlan was noting the sharp rents in Grant's shirt about the shoulders, the deep, blood-spurting slashes across his face—marks of the lead-tipped bullwhip. Again thundered Hawlitt's harsh command:

"Beg, Ranger!"

Fascinated, Donlan watched the long lashes uncoil with a buzzing whine. He did not look at Grant. Well he knew the deadliness of those hissing thongs. Desperately, he was searching for his next move. He heard the horses shifting uneasily behind him. Stooping suddenly, he picked up a short stick and hurled it at the mettlesome sorrel. The animal snorted wildly, lunging at its halter rope.

Inside, Hawlitt's head snapped up like a startled deer's. He glowered at the Mexican's searching tension. "See what's spookin' the hosses, Pinto."

Donlan slid forward to the corner of the adobe, flattened against the wall, waited. He clutched a heavy-handled Bowie knife in his left hand. Pinto lurched out the door, turned, moved abreast of him—one, two, three steps beyond.

Donlan sprang, lithe as a cat. His right arm circled the Mexican's neck. His left arm made an arc, moving upward, the Bowie ripping into the muscular body somewhere above the middle.

Pinto exploded like a released coil-spring, contracting and bursting. A strangled yell cleared his throat, rising wildly, ending in a mortal note. He plunged forward, taking Donlan with him before he could fully release his hold.

Donlan came to his feet, looked around. The kid had jumped from the doorway, gun in hand. Hawlitt was only a few feet behind, slapping for his own gun as they spotted Donlan in the moonlight.

Orange flame was licking out from the kid's direction as Donlan whipped up his own gun. He calmly placed two heavy slugs in the kid's middle and then dropped flat. Hawlitt's first shot sang over his head. Donlan lined on the bulky owlhooter, and triggered. A choked scream tore from the outlaw's lips, and his gun clattered to

the ground. Whirling, he plunged inside the doorway.

Donlan went after him, fast.

AS he leaped through the doorway, Hawlitt hurled a heavy stool from across the room. Donlan bounded to the side. But even as he was in the air, the stool caught him across the knees, slamming him back against the wall, carrying him down. Swiftly, he rolled clear, lunged to his feet. He started to move forward, but his left leg crumpled beneath him, plunging him back to his knees. He cursed savagely. His knee was smashed, or at least numbed so badly that it would not take his weight.

"Look out, Jim!" Grant's voice was a scream.

Hawlitt was uncoiling the blood-stained bullwhip, sending the thongs licking out at Donlan's face. Donlan ducked, tried to avoid those murderous lashes. Pain, fiery as cactus thorns, bit into his arms and neck and face as the coils ripped through clothing and flesh.

Instinctively, Donlan had flung up his arms to protect his eyes. Now one of the curling thongs had coiled about the gun in his hand, and in the back-lash it was torn from him and flung half-way across the room.

Hawlitt didn't seem to notice it. He was grinning now, a crooked and twisted grin of grotesque ugliness. His one eye was a livid pool of green fire as he coiled the long whip again and sent it spitting forward like a striking snake.

"So you're that kid, Bradley?" he snarled. "Sidin' the Rangers, now! Wal, I'll teach yuh!"

The hissing thongs seemed to be everywhere, filling the room with their mocking snarl, licking at his arms and face like fiery talons, stabbing at his eyes, turning his whole body into a bundle of fierce agonies.

"Beg, whelp of a wolf!"

The room was a swimming red haze through the blood in Donlan's eyes. The hot lashes were licking out again, coiling about his shoulders. A sharp jerk flung him forward on his face. He angled his body half around, started rolling toward Hawlitt. Somehow, he had to get inside those murderous lashes. Again the thongs licked downward, probing at his eyes. Donlan rolled his head, felt the hot lead ripping into his throat. Instinctively his hand flew to his throat; found the hungry rawhide that was draining his blood.

Hope surged in Donlan again as his hand closed upon the leaders. He felt Hawlitt yank back, but he held on grimly. Rolling, he came to his knees, twisting the thongs securely about his hand.

Suddenly, Hawlitt flung the whip's stock straight into Donlan's face. Swooping, he gathered up Donlan's gun and started backing away, a snarl twisting his lips.

Doggedly lifting his head, he watched Hawlitt back away. He was lifting the heavy gun, triumphant, merciless. Then over Hawlitt's shoulder, Donlan caught the frantic struggling of Grant. The Ranger was working his hands downward, bringing the rawhide bonds against the edge of the big knife planted just above his head. His hands came free, clutched at the knife and wrenched it away. Hawlitt was within reach now. The knife lifted, poised.

A tightening finger jerked spasmodically as the knife plunged deep alongside Hawlitt's neck. The gun exploded, the bullet punching into the clay floor. A gurgling scream died in Hawlitt's throat. He plunged forward, his hands tearing at his neck.

Over his limp body, Donlan met the clear eyes of Grant. With his hands free, the man was calmly loosening the rest of his bonds. He spoke coolly: "Thanks, pardner!"

With his numerous cuts and bruises doctored and bandaged, Donlan lay on a bunk near the doorway of the adobe and watched the Ranger dig three graves out near the river's bank. When his grim task was finished, he came back and sat near Donlan. Finally he spoke in his quiet, unexcited way.

"I'm takin' you back with me, Jim."

Donlan met the gray eyes steadily. "I'm innocent, Grant. I'll never go back to serve that sentence."

The Ranger was on his feet, extending a friendly hand. "I've been thinkin', Jim. A Ranger needs a pardner on a lot of jobs like this. I think I've found the right man. What I mean, Jim, is that Hawlitt bragged plenty before you showed up. You're a free man now!"

DEAD MAN'S GOLD

By COSTA CAROUSSO

When lawless guns got you penned, and your number's up, brain-work is the need. When in that fix, waddy, play along with an old timer like leather-faced Pete who knows what makes an owlhooter's heart tick.

THE OLD MAN stopped at the edge of the clearing around the cabin and turned to the boy beside him. "Consarn it, Bub!" he said testily, "how many times do I have to tell you to make sure and drop the latch when you shut the door!"

"I made sure," the boy muttered.

" 'Tain't my fault."

"Well, it sure enough ain't mine," the old man replied, "and if varmints got into our grub again, it's you that's walking to town. You was the last one out this morning."

"All right, all right!" said the boy, thinking that if the waters of the Little Pigeon didn't leave some gold in their pans pretty soon, old Pete would be harder to live with than a just-woke up bear. He remembered what his father used to say when he was a button. "Son," he'd say with lights dancing in his eyes, "there isn't a better-natured, easier-going man than Pete this side of Sioux City, excepting of course, when he's tired or hungry or unlucky or needing a drink—which is pretty near always." Then Pete would open his mouth to protest but could only splutter helplessly and would finally give it up and join in the light-hearted laughter. That was in the old days, the good days, before bushwhack lead had stopped his father on his way to town, and bushwhack killers had stolen the gold he was carrying to the bank. Thinking of his father now sent a chill of loneliness through the boy. The feeling was heightened by the mournful creaking of the door as it swung slowly on its hinges in the evening breeze.

Old Pete was the first to step into the semi-gloom of the cabin. The sun had been bright and harsh all day, and indoors he was almost blind. He blinked his eyes hard. "The dirty, thieving, sneaking . . ." he began.

The boy pressed past him. Their bunks had been overturned and the mattresses slit open. The flour had been thrown into the ashes of the fireplace and the empty can tossed to a corner. The slab of bacon was gone from its hook. The jar of grease had been smashed and its contents smeared into the rough pine floor.

The boy wheeled and ran to join Pete at the doorway. A shot thundered from beyond the clearing and lead tore through the corner of the door post and sent bark and singing splinters into their faces.

Pete dragged the boy into the cabin by the collar with one hand and slammed the door shut with the other. "The dirty, thieving, sneaking scum!" he repeated.

He went to the corner and picked up his old Sharps, relic of the wild, reckless days when he hunted bison. He let the gun drop from his hands with more roughness than he had ever used with a firearm in his life. The rifle was useless, its hammer snapped off clean by a heavy blow.

PETE drew his horn-handled .44 from the worn holster and handed it to the boy who took it with an anxious question in his eyes. "Keep looking from the windows and the crack in the door," Pete said, "but don't let them spot you."

"Think they'll try rushing us, Pete?"

"If they had the brains of an Ojibway," the oldster answered, "they'd be burning us out right now, from the back. But since they ain't already begun, I'm figuring they ain't got the brains of an Ojibway. And I've fooled several of them critters in my day, not to mention quite a few Commanches and a couple of stray Piutes, both of which breeds is several times smarter." His words reassured the boy, but he himself was far from reassured. Without food, without a long-gun, and with ammunition strictly limited, the situation was pretty bad. And before it got any better it was going to get lots worse.

He pulled open the table drawer and took out a skinning knife that for almost a quarter of a century had been used only for slicing bacon, but whose edge had been kept razor-sharp by the habits of a lifetime. He set the point between two logs of the rear wall and began to carve an opening, praying he'd get it finished before their ambushers realized that the back of the cabin was vulnerable.

He worked in a silence that was unbroken save for the noise of steel biting into wood and the footsteps of the boy as he went from the door to each window and then back to the door. Then Pete turned, terrified, as a second shot roared. He saw that the boy was unhurt, and as calmly as possible he said, "Head down, Bub. Keep your head down!"

The oldster went back to his work, and when he finally had a six-inch square cut to the daylight, he saw that dusk had fallen and it would soon be dark. The first pangs of hunger were beginning to stir in his belly, and he drew his belt in a notch. He remembered the days when he and the younker's father had tightened in their belts until their guts had begun to bloat

with hunger, and then had boiled the belts and eaten them. It was not his own hunger and his own life that worried him. It was the boy, who one day ought to grow into a man as fine as his father had been.

Pete rose stiffly to his feet with a tired sigh, "I'll cover the right hand window and the door," he said. "You watch the left and the back. Better let me take the gun."

"Reckon they'll attack tonight?"

"No telling what they'll do, younker," Pete said. "If they could read sky sign they'd see that a lot of cloud and maybe rain is due in about twenty-four hours. Tonight there'll be a lot of moon."

"We'll give them Holy Harry if they try something, won't we Pete?" the boy said. The next instant he walked before the window, and humming lead whammed into the cabin wall.

"Consarn it, Bub!" Pete shouted. "Next time you walk across their line of fire like that I'm going to slap your ears off if a bullet don't. I'm sick of reminding you. Keep your head down!"

"Aw," said the boy scornfully, "those coyotes couldn't even hit the side of a barn with a broom."

"Makes no difference," Pete snapped. "A lucky shot can kill you just as dead as a good one. Keep your head down. I'm warning you for the last time."

The boy glared at him defiantly, and deep inside of himself Pete chuckled at the lad's spunkiness. He'd be a good one, all right, when . . . if . . . He left the thought unfinished because he didn't dare to finish it. He scowled ferociously at the boy. "Back to your post," he commanded.

For a long time, Pete did not know how long, there was no sound save for the scuffling of their boots across the pine floor as they made their endless rounds. The darkness in the cabin was profound, and they could barely see each other. Once the boy's steps paused for a moment, and he heard a faint metallic sound and the rustling of cloth as the boy kitched up his trousers and tightened his belt. The lad had the fierce appetite of a healthy boy of thirteen, and Pete knew what pangs he must be suffering. He cursed bitterly. He was not a patient man by nature, and he longed to go out into the night and hunt the hunters, matching his skill and cunning with theirs, swapping lead with them, and finding out just how dearly they were willing to pay for the gold. He reined in this feeling quick, knowing that he had no right to gamble with his own life while that of the boy depended on him.

"Pete!" The boy's voice came to him in a low, urgent whisper. "Pete, I think someones' coming."

The oldster rushed quickly to the loophole and pushed the boy aside. "Keep a sharp lookout!" he hissed. He strained his eyes against the blackness, strained them until pain shot into his skull. When he finally located the crawling figure it was through his sense of hearing rather than sight. Vaguely he made out a dark form that moved slowly against the black earth. With each movement there was a faint rustling sound, as of dry sticks being dragged along the ground. Tinder! Pete thought instantly.

He sighted the gun as carefully as it was possible to sight, decided that his target was too unsure, and he dropped to his knees, steadying the gun against the log. For a moment he thought of holding his fire and letting the crawling varmint come closer. Then he realized that unless the marauders were dumber than he suspected, they would surely start a diversionary attack. He dared wait no longer. He breathed a silent prayer for Divine guidance, breathed once more to steady his muscles and nerves, held it, and pressed his finger very gently.

THE darkness was rent with noise and with light. A scream sharp as a knife tore through the rumbling echoes, and Pete knew he had not killed his man. He ran across the cabin and handed the gun to the boy because his vision had been ruined by the muzzle flash.

"You'll have to take over completely for a while, my bucko," he said. "I'm going to be blinder than a bat for the next fifteen minutes."

The boy's hand was steady as he took the gun. There were no wasted words as he began his rounds. Pete knew that he could rely on him now. This night would make a man out of hm . . . if it didn't kill him.

Nothing had happened when Pete finally got his sight back and took up his post

again. Nothing had happened by the time the stars paled and faded from the sky and the east grew grey with the rising sun. Nothing happened except that sleep dragged remorselessly to close shut the eyelids over their strained and wearied eyes. Nothing except that the muscles of their legs throbbed agonizingly from ten thousand monotonous strides, and the vulture-beak of hunger tore at their entrails and sapped their strength and made their senses reel.

When dawn came Pete called over the boy and showed him the bundle of brush that had been dragged to within twenty yards of the cabin, and the furrowed trail in the soft earth that might have been made by a dragging, shattered leg.

"Reckon that learned them something," said the boy. "Reckon they won't try any more sneak attacks."

"Don't count on it," Pete said, "because they're counting on us figuring them out wrong and letting down our guard." They would not be caught napping, Pete swore, but he wondered how they would be caught finally. Hunger and thirst could kill just as surely as lead. Slow death or violent death, which was the better of the two? He racked his brain desperately for a plan that would spell living for the boy at least, but he found nothing.

The sun roared upward through an almost white sky. The heat inside the cabin became terrific. The fumes of resin that had had once been a sweet perfume were now deadly as noxious gasses in their drowsing effect. The heat mounted and thirst became a torment greater than the need for food.

Pete pried the lead from a bullet, cut it in two with the skinning knife, and tossed half to the boy. "Chaw on this a while," he said. "It'll start the juices working."

He looked into the sky. Small puffs of cumulus were forming as the sun sucked the moisture from the earth. By afternoon they would have swelled up into huge, leaden cauliflowers. By evening there would be a storm somewhere in the valley. If they were lucky, they would have water tonight.

He tightened his belt surreptitiously and wondered how long he would be able to hold on. The sun reached its zenith and began its merciful descent. Toward mid-afternoon he caught the boy glancing toward the flour that had been mixed with the ashes of the fireplace. That about settled it for Pete. The gold was not worth that much. Gold was worth so much per ounce in money, in food, in clothing. It was worth so much per ounce in man's toil and sweat. It was not worth the boy's agony. It was not worth the boy's life. For a moment he considered calling out to their ambushers and telling them he was ready to say where the gold was hidden. The next instant he saw that he had no right to act without consulting the boy. They were partners. Half the gold was his.

"Bub," he said through lips that were beginning to swell and split. "Bub, I'm thinking of letting those coyotes have the gold. I'm thinking it ain't worth this agony."

The boy stopped for a moment in his relentless striding and faced the oldster. His look was level and steady, and his voice carried a sureness that showed a lot of thinking behind it.

"You reckon they'll let us live after they get the gold?" he asked.

Instantly Pete saw that the lad was right. When he spoke again, he was not speaking to boy, but to a man—his equal.

"What do you think we ought to do?" he asked.

I'm thinking we ought to make a break for it," the boy said. "Tonight, when it gets dark. And I'm thinking that we ought to burn a lot of powder should anyone try to stop us."

For a moment Pete wanted to fall in with the idea, but caution, bred of years of experience, held him back. The marauders would be waiting for a break tonight. Their sights would be lined on the door and the windows, and the slightest movement would send lead tearing through the night. But he could not tell this to the boy, who would mistake his caution for fear.

"Wait," he said. "I'm working on a better idea."

"What?" the boy demanded. "What is there to do besides fight our way out?"

"Wait," Pete repeated. "I'm working on it. I'll let you know soon as I've got all the pieces together." He was lying. He didn't have any other idea. Only the

thought that some men would do the devil's work for gold, and that the devil was a strange employer who couldn't be trusted at all. Not at all. He kept thinking of that while he plied his ceaseless, weary vigil.

Out of the silence came a shout, "Where's the gold hid?" Pete didn't answer. The boy didn't answer. The question came again. "Where's the gold? This is your last chance!"

Silence.

The silence was shattered by gunthunder that tore the quiet of the afternoon into echoing fragments of sound as volley after volley of lead slammed through the windows, through the door, through the walls of the cabin.

Pete gasped only a little when the flattened slug smashed into his thigh, but the boy heard him and ran to his side, his eyes wide with terror.

"Pete," he said. "Pete, are you hurt bad?"

"Sh!" said Pete. "Don't let them know I'm hit. No, I ain't hurt bad." He handed the gun over, and eased himself to the floor while the boy watched anxiously. "Get me my knife," he said, "and then get back to your watching. There's no telling if that scum heard you. Pronto, now!" he concluded. "Ain't no need to stare like that. I've already dug enough lead out of this carcass to sink a good-size rowboat. This is nothing."

BUT it was. It was agony that throbbed in the pit of his stomach and thundered against his temples; that clenched his teeth together brutally to hold back the screaming. His senses reeled and he prayed he wouldn't pass out as the knife-blade touched the lead, slid under it, and his hand pushed down, down.

He let the blood flow a while, then tightened his bandanna above the wound, slid the knife beneath the tourniquet, and twisted, wondering if the strength that was left him was enough.

For hours he struggled in a hazy hell of pain and heat and thirst and hopelessness. In the distance he could hear the rhythmic sound of the boy's footsteps. Once he tried to call out to him, but only a dry whisper came from his lips. The sound grew softer and softer and at last it faded. Once, while he slept he heard a noise that might have been thunder or gunfire. He didn't know which, and before he could listen more carefully, he sank into sleep or unconsciousness again.

It was the chill of dawn, and the feverish throbbing of his thigh that awakened him to painful awareness. Several moments passed before he understood that the creaking door meant the boy was gone. He braced himself to get up, and his hand touched the barrel of his gun. The barrel was stuck through a piece of paper with clumsy writing on it that read, GOING FOR HELP.

Pete wondered how long ago that had been written, how long the lad had been gone. Maybe he had slipped past the ring of watchful eyes that guarded the cabin and was on his way to town, to the sheriff. On the other hand maybe he had been captured and his captors were at this moment torturing him to give up a secret that he did not know. He cursed his uncertainty and his helplessness, and the men who had brought this to pass. He longed to drag himself from the cabin and face these unseen, unknown killers with his defiance snarling from his gun. But he knew that he could do nothing yet. He lay back and cursed some more.

He heard the shout from beyond the clearing and he raised himself on one elbow to hear what would follow. "We got the boy!" a harsh voice said. Pete knew exactly what that meant. Torture!

"Don't tell, Pete! Don't. . ."

Pete pushed himself painfully erect and dragged his pain-wracked body to the cabin door.

"Come out with your hands high!" the voice ordered. "We got you covered."

Pete heard footsteps converging toward him from behind as he walked, but he moved forward without looking back. When he reached the clearing a man rose from behind a clump of brush and levelled a rifle at the center of Pete's chest.

"That's far enough," he said, his narrow eyes watching Pete closely.

Pete smiled a thin smile. "Reckon I can jump that far with one leg and bite you, Sugrue?" he asked, wondering what had turned a petty long-looper to thievery, with murder in the offing.

Reese Sugrue gave no indication that

he noticed the taunt, but his lips curled as he said, "I got no time to waste with talk. Where's the gold?"

Two other men had come up to stand alongside of Pete, and the oldster turned to examine them. They were strangers, but he knew the breed well. They were big men, strong men, but something in the lines about their mouths, something in the set of their chins, betrayed their inner weakness. They were shrewd men, dangerous men, like coyotes or hyenas. Once he had watched a bunch of coyotes snapping and snarling for the choice morsels of a carrion steer, and he wondered how these men would act if they had the gold. He looked beyond Sugrue and saw a fourth man lying on the ground. There was a dirty, bloodied bandage around his knee, and pitilessly he prayed that his knee-cap was shattered. For the boy was lying a few feet from the man with blood seeping from his shoulder, and the boy had done nothing to deserve this pain. had done nothing ot deserve this pain.

"Where's the gold?" Sugrue repeated, and when Pete gave no answer, he turned to his two henchmen. "Try tickling the boy's feet with a match," he said. "That might make him remember."

Pete watched helplessly while the two men got to their knees and began to drag off the lad's boots. He searched his mind desperately, but no help came. Only the thought that some men would indeed do the devil's work for gold, and that coyotes would turn on each other.

"Wait!" he said. "The boy don't know nothing. I'm the only one that knows."

"Well," said Sugrue, "are you going to spill it, or will we have to . . ."

"I'll spill it," said Pete.

"Pete!" shouted the boy. "The hell with them. Don't tell them. They can't scare me."

"Quiet, Bub," the oldster said to the boy. "I'll handle this." And to Sugrue he said, "Let me sit down." He eased himself gently to the ground and waited a moment, giving himself time to think.

"Well," Sugrue prompted impatiently, "where is it?"

"It's in the cave," Pete said. "Dead Man's Cave."

"Where's that?" Sugrue asked. "I never heard of it."

"It ain't far," Pete answered. "Go down to the Little Pigeon yonder and turn upstream. About a hundred, a hundred fifty yards, and you come to a little spring. Follow that up till you come to a cave. The gold's in the back of the cave, under a rock."

SUGRUE motioned to the bigger of the two men. "You go, Hobe," he said, and to Pete, "God help your hide if you're lying."

The man called Hobe rose to his feet. "Why do they call it Dead Man's Cave?" he asked Pete.

"I found a dead man there," Pete answered.

Hobe looked at Pete closely, then turned to Sugrue, who nodded his head toward the river and said, "Git going!" Hobe hitched up his levis and started off.

"Trust your men pretty well, eh Sugrue? Real honest, trustworthy crooks, I see."

Sugrue's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

Pete shrugged. "It's a pretty fair amount of gold if it isn't split four ways."

Sugrue whirled toward Hobe. He didn't exactly raise his rifle, but he held it ready. "Hobe!" he called. "Hobe, I'm thinking I'd like it a lot better if you left your gun here."

Hobe turned and faced Sugrue defiantly. The rifle lifted a bit, and Hobe's hands unbuckled his gunbelt. He came back and dropped it at Sugrue's feet and turned once more toward the river.

When he was out of sight Sugrue turned to the other man. "Not that I don't trust Hobe," he said, "but I'd feel better in my mind if the horses were right nearby where we could watch them."

His henchman rose to his feet without a word and started out across the clearing.

"Pretty difficult business, stealing," said Pete. "Sometimes I wonder if honest money ain't easier come by."

Sugrue whirled with an oath. The gun in his hands whipped out and slammed across Pete's jaw. The sight tore the skin cruelly and blood ran down the oldster's chin.

"You're going to pay for that in hell, Sugrue," said Pete. "I'm telling you straight so you don't forget it."

Sugrue laughed. "With your gold I can afford to pay. The pickings in this river

was always pretty rich."

Suddenly, as though he had been told in so many words, Pete knew who had bushwhacked the boy's father. He didn't dare look at the boy to see if he had understood Sugrue's words, for fear that the lad might say something that would betray them. He waited.

The man who had gone after the horses came back and ground hitched them at the edge of the clearing. "Hobe's been gone a long time," he said.

"That's what I'm thinking," agreed Sugrue.

"What's the matter?" taunted Pete. "Don't you hombres trust each other?"

Neither of the men answered.

Time passed with maddening slowness.

"Hobe wouldn't dare try to make off without a horse," said Sugrue, thinking aloud. "Without a horse and without a gun."

"Reckon I ought to go see what's holding him up, boss?" said Sugrue's henchman, rising to his feet.

Sugrue nodded. "Better leave your gun here, too," he suggested, balancing his rifle in his hands.

The man whirled angrily. "What the hell is this?" he demanded. "I notice you're keeping yours right handy."

"I need it to keep watch on our friends."

The other man growled angrily. "Why don't we knock them off now and be done with it. I don't like this business."

"Don't be a damn fool, Black," said Sugrue. "How do we know if we got the truth about the gold?"

Black nodded agreement and turned to leave.

"Your cutter," Sugrue whispered quietly. "Don't forget to leave your cutter."

Black unhitched his belt and dropped his gun beside the other, then strode off.

Pete waited till he was out of sight, out of hearing, before he spoke. He spoke loudly enough so the wounded man on the ground would hear him. "How big a cut are you slicing yourself out of this deal, Sugrue?"

Sugrue answered instantly, with a voice of outraged decency. "A quarter," he said. "We always share, and share alike."

"While the others got guns," Pete agreed. "But now that you persuaded the others to leave their guns?"

Sugrue caught on quick, like a coyote will smell out carrion, and the gleam of avarice in his eyes betrayed his thoughts.

The man on the ground caught on quick, too. "Why, you dirty, double-dealing—" He had dragged his gun almost entirely out of its holster when Sugrue fired. It was a calm, unhurried shot, and it entered almost exactly between his henchman's eyes. The next shot was not unhurried.

When Pete saw that the wounded man would make his play, he braced his good leg and dove for the guns the two men had discarded, praying he would have time for one shot, swearing that he would make it good, even if Sugrue got him first. When he fell his fingers almost reached the gun. Almost, but not quite. He kicked himself forward spasmodically, closed his fingers on steel.

When Sugrue wheeled he saw the muzzle of the gun rising toward him, and he triggered frantically, and the shot went wild. Then Pete's gun was centered between his eyes. The vengeful snarl of the Colt was the last thing he heard on earth.

There was a sound of urgent footsteps in the brush at the edge of the clearing, and the boy heard it and surged to his knees. His hands found the rifle that had slipped from Sugrue's dead fingers.

The man named Black jerked to a stop at what he saw and his terrified eyes searched for his most dangerous opponent. That moment's hesitation was his undoing. The boy's slug plucked at his heart.

The boy dropped the rifle, picked up a Colt, and ran toward the nearest horse.

"Where you making for, Bub?"

"After Hobe!" said the boy. "He got the gold."

Pete shook his head. "All Hobe got," he said, "is the losing side of an argument with a whole passel of rattlesnakes."

"Then where's the gold?" the boy asked.

"Let's dig up some grub first," said Pete. "I got a pretty good appetite." He paused a moment, grinned. "Of course if you don't trust me, I can tell you right now."

The boy grinned right back at him. "Let's dig up some grub," he said.

Hot Graze For The Woolies!

By William Heuman

Where his cattle should have been, Cass Benton found 10,000 stinkin' sheep. It was a gunsmoke festival when he called for the showdown play.

COMING DOWN the east slope of the pass, Cass Benton let the big bay animal pick its own way. It was rocky here. Huge boulders were scattered in the erosion cut, and the loam underneath was soft, the horse's hoofs making deep indentations.

The timber line lay just below them, and beyond that Cass could see Sentinel Valley, stretching out for a hundred miles, twenty miles wide, a dozen smaller tributary valleys leading into it.

Cass rolled a cigarette and smoked as the horse ambled into the scrub timber on the shoulder of the pass.

At the base of Sentinel Peak, Eagle River swung sharply to the north, seeming to touch the valley wall before it bent back again toward the middle of the valley. In the elbow thus formed lay the small Bar 7 spread, a hundred or so head of beef, log ranch house, a feed shed, corral, not much more; the kind of place every cowpuncher dreamed of.

Cass Benton had the deed to the Bar 7 in a small oilskin pouch tucked safely inside his worn leather jacket. The piece of paper represented eight years hard labor on a half dozen ranches.

He'd found it six months ago in Sentinel Valley, passing through to take a job on the other side of the mountains. He'd stopped at the little Bar 7 overnight, and he'd had a look around. Ben Harkness, the owner, hadn't been thinking of selling then, but when he'd met Cass in Mountain City six months later it was a different story. Harkness said he wanted to go to California. He was headed that way now with Cass's money.

Moving down through the timber now, the smell reached him—the smell of sheep is strong.

Cass frowned and pulled up. He hadn't been aware of the fact that there were sheep in Sentinel Valley. When he'd passed through the previous summer scattered herds of beef grazed on this lush

"Figurin' on makin' trouble, Benton?" rasped the lead rider, dismounting.

grass, and where the cattleman predominated sheep herders had an awful time trying to horn in. But there were sheep below him now. There was no mistaking that stink.

Cass pushed down into the tall timber. He glanced apprehensively in the direction of the Bar 7. He was still too far away to see the buildings, but he could make out the thin column of white, campfire smoke lifting up toward the rim of the Valley.

Harkness had stated that he'd had one hand working for him—a stove-in puncher by the name of Ad Phelps. That fire would be Ad's, and it meant that the old man was making his noon-day meal. The sun was high in the sky now, and becoming warm.

Cass slipped off his leather jacket and tied it behind his saddle. He was in the valley proper when he saw the sheep—not a large band. A herder's wagon was parked in a grove.

A DOG started to bark as Cass came out into the meadow, skirting the smelly animals.

The herder came out of the wagon, chewing food. He was a black-bearded man with baggy trousers and a greasy, food-stained vest. He carried no arms, although a rifle leaned against the wagon.

As Cass moved across the meadow the herder made no move to go for the rifle. He stood there with his hands in his vest pockets, watching Cass.

Either this man was a damned fool, and didn't know he was in cattle country, Cass thought, or there had been a very serious change in Sentinel Valley since the preceding summer that allowed sheep men to graze the woolies wherever they wished.

Before Cass had a chance to speak, two men came riding across the meadow. Winchesters rested in their saddle holsters, and six-guns adorned their hips.

The rider in the lead was very tall and thin-shouldered. He spat out a cigarette as he came between Cass and the herder.

"Where to, friend?" he casually inquired.

"Your business?" Cass wanted to know.

The thin man laughed. He said softly, "There's three of us, Jack. We'll damn well make it our business."

"Your sheep?" Cass asked.

The tall man chuckled. He winked at the man with him, a shorter, stockier, dull-faced gunnie. He said, not answering the question either way.

"Like 'em?"

"They stink out loud," Cass assured him.

The tall man laughed again. "Reckon you cowmen will have to git used to 'em, mister."

Cass's brown face was expressionless, but the doubts were running through his mind now, only they were no longer just doubts. Something had happened in this peaceful valley, something not good for cattle men. Sheep and beef couldn't exist side by side. The woolies fouled the drinking water; they ate the grass down to the roots, killing it, and for these reasons every cowman in the west had his gun primed and cocked at the first sign or smell of sheep.

"If you're figurin' on lookin' fer a job down there," the tall man told him, "better change yore mind. There ain't any fer cattlemen."

Cass nodded. "I'll look around," he said. He had these men tabbed. They were toughs hired by the sheep owners to protect the flocks, and that meant that the project was big, not just a few scattered flocks. An owner didn't pay high gunhand salaries unless he was making a profit.

The tall red-head studied him for a moment, taking in the Colt .44 on Cass's right hip and the Winchester in the saddle holster. He said softly,

"Money's in sheep in this valley, mister. You lookin' fer a nice soft job see George Quade down in Sentinel City. He's takin' on hands."

"Your kind of work?" Cass asked.

The tall man nodded. "Quade's takin' on plenty o' hands."

"I'll think about it," Cas said, and he rode on. There was little doubt in his mind now why Sam Harkness had sold out. Sheepmen had come to the valley, and they'd come strong, with guns. They were already the power here, and the cattle men were on the defensive—not a good spot—one for a man who had just invested eight year's earnings in a cattle ranch.

He passed more flocks, larger ones down below, and then a few cattle. He was approaching the big bend of Eagle River now, and he was anxious to have a look at the place he'd purchased. The big bay horse had been taking it easy all morning and part of the afternoon, and was anxious to run. Cass opened up a little and the bay went down a slope at a sharp gallop, moving past a dozen or so head of beef grazing along the bottom of the incline.

A rifle cracked from the timber. The ball sang over Cass's head. He pulled up.

Gunsmoke lifted from the bushes, forming a fringe in front of the stand of timber. Cass calmly rolled a cigarette and waited. He was lighting the cigarette when the rifleman came out of the woods, gun still trained on him, walking slowly across the short, clipped grass.

The shooter was very slim, dressed in black leather jacket and a big flat-crowned sombrero. Cass's eyes widened as the figure drew closer. He blinked.

"First damned time a woman ever shot at me, ma'am."

She was young, brown-haired, hazel-colored eyes. She said tersely,

"There'll be plenty more shots if you don't ride over that hill, mister."

Cass nodded. "This is a touchy country," he observed. "I didn't know the range was closed to traffic."

"On my property," the girl said stiffly, "it's closed to sheepmen and their hired killers."

"I don't blame you," Cass said, "if you run beef. I don't have any use for woolies, myself."

The girl lowered the rifle. She said cautiously, "I'm not taking any chances after what happened over at the Harkness place."

Cass Benton paled.

"What happened at the Harkness place?"

"Take a look," the girl said. "It's a mile over the next grade."

Cass touched the rim of his hat and rode off without another word. He saw it when he reached the top of the slope. He rode on then, staring grimly at the heap of ashes and charred wood which had been the ranch house. The ashes were cold, but a little campfire was going nearby, and a man sat on a rocking chair in front of the fire, working on a riata. The rocking chair appeared to be the only item salvaged from the flames.

The man in the rocking chair was small, gray-haired. Cool eyes looked out from a leathery face. He watched Cass dismount and trail the reins over the bay's head. He didn't get up, but he watched Cass coming up, his fingers still working on the leather rope in his hands. He said,

"Benton?"

"That's right," Cass said. He knew that this was Ad Phelps, the old man Sam Harkness had had working for him.

"I got a letter from Sam," Phelps said by way of explanation. "Told me he was sellin' out to you an' that I was to expect you."

"I'm here," Cass murmured. His eyes moved to the burned out building. He walked past the rocking chair, looked at the charred embers. He heard Ad Phelps say softly,

"Reckon Sam Harkness wasn't much of a fightin' man, mister."

Cass came back, stood in front of the little fire. He said,

"This happened after Harkness sold me the place."

Ad Phelps nodded and squinted at the rope. "Day after I got Sam's letter tellin' me he'd sold out to you."

"Who did it?"

Phelps looked at him and then smiled as if he liked the tone of Cass's voice.

"Big Three," he said. "Cranston, MacSween, and Quade."

"Sheep?" Cass asked him. He remembered the name Quade.

"Sheep," Phelps nodded. "Reckon they're in here to stay, Benton."

"Not on my range," Cass stated. "What about our stock? Harkness said he had over a hundred head."

"He had 'em," Phelps agreed, "when he left fer Mountain City to sell out, the stock was run off by the same hombres that burned you out."

Cass Benton looked across the hills. He could hear the water of Eagle River running close by, concealed by the tall grass.

Ad Phelps said by way of explanation, "I was lookin' fer trouble, mister, an' I wasn't figurin' on runnin' after Harkness pulled out. A man works fer a brand an'

that's his brand until he gets another. I was low on supplies an' had to run into Sentinel City. They was watchin' me from the hills when I went out. When I come back this is what I found."

"See any of them?" Cass asked.

"Got a look at a long, lean, red-haired polecat," Phelps said laconically. "He was movin' pretty fast. I missed him twice, but the range was pretty bad."

"You're sure," Cass said.

"I spotted his horse," Phelps said. "Halloran rides a dapple gray. I seen him a dozen times in town. Ain't but one dapple gray this part o' the country."

Cass nodded. Halloran was undoubtedly the lead rider he'd met at the sheep herder's wagon.

"When did all this happen? I passed through here six months ago and there wasn't a woolie on the range."

"The Big Three moved in with ten thousand o' the stinkin' critters," Phelps growled, "an' plenty o' protection to go with 'em. They come in over the pass an' began to move down into the valley. Pretty soon they were spreadin' all over the range with more of 'em comin' in every week."

"Nobody try to stop them?" Cass asked incredulously.

"Half a dozen boys from Sentinel Valley are buried in Boothill," Phelps stated. "The Big Three have professional gunslingers. They shoot too damned fast and too straight."

"So the small ranchers have been getting out," Cass observed.

"Few of 'em left yet," Phelps said, "men like Tom Grayson over the hill. He's stickin' it out, but they're watchin' him. I'll give Jarvis Cranston credit fer one thing. He makes a fair offer afore he moves in an' takes over a range. He'll make you one, too, because you still got Sam Harkness's paper."

"Tom Grayson have a daughter?" Cass wanted to know.

Ad Phelps glanced up at him quickly, and then grinned. He nodded and said, "If Della Grayson were a man she'd o' been dead three months ago, Benton."

Cass smiled. "That's a good sign that the whole Valley's not dead yet."

Phelps spat. "You still ranchin', Benton?"

"I came here to raise beef. I'm still raising it."

"Be needin' me?" Phelps asked. You got no beef on your range now?"

"Stick around. I'll have some. I'll pay you what Harkness paid."

"Ain't worried about money," Phelps grinned. "Sure would like a crack at them damned muttonpunchers though. Reckon I don't like to be pushed around either."

Cass studied the little man appraisingly. He said, "I like your style, Ad. We'll get along."

Ad Phelps got up and squinted at the riata. He said, "You figurin' on runnin' beef, Benton, you better git them woolies off your range. They're up on Squaw Creek now. Come in yesterday afternoon."

Cass smiled. "We'll have a look at them."

Phelps saddled a wiry little sorrel, calmly examined the charges in his Winchester, and nodded that he was ready.

II

SQUAW CREEK was a mile and a half east of the burned-out ranch house. Cass saw the sheep as they came out of a small stand of timber and started down through hock-high grass along the little creek. The flock numbered about a thousand, with the usual sheep herder's wagon half-hidden among the trees.

"The Big Three own every sheep in the valley?" Cass asked as they pulled up.

"Big business," Phelps stated. "They'll have a couple o' hundred thousand in here afore they're finished."

"Let's go," Cass said. They rode down toward the wagon, and Cass watched the woods carefully. He spotted the herder coming up from the Creek with a pail of water. The man stared at them for a moment, and then kept walking toward the wagon.

Phelps growled, "Nobody's run agin' 'em for a long time, Benton. They think they own the world."

"They don't own this part of it," Cass said tersely. He dismounted in front of the wagon and walked toward the door. The sheep herder had gone inside. They could hear him rummaging around. Cass called sharply,

"Get out."

There was a moment of silence inside, and then the herder came to the door, a thin, sallow man with a straggling mustache, stained with tobacco juice. He was grinning at Cass as he stood in the doorway.

Cass said to him, "These your sheep?"

The herder grinned, spat tobacco juice. "I look like a sheep owner, mister?"

"Whoever owns them," Cass said, "you have an hour to get them across the Creek. You're on my range."

The herder laughed outright. "Big Three runs this valley, mister. Reckon you ain't been here long."

"You have an hour," Cass said, "before I go to work on them myself. You'll lose your flock if I do."

The herder looked beyond him, and Cass heard Ad Phelps' warning. He turned around. Three riders were coming toward them.

"You kin talk about it with Quade's riders," the herder chuckled. "I don't know a damned thing around here."

Cass waited for the riders to come up. The man in the lead was riding very loosely in the saddle, shoulders and head swaying more than was necessary, and as he drew closer Cass could see from the flush on his face that he'd been drinking heavily.

The two men with him were also drunk. They tumbled from the saddles and lurched toward the wagon. The man in the lead, a yellow-haired man with a wide, bony face and a battered nose, came up with his hands hooked in his gunbelt, an insolent grin on his face.

"Trouble, Joe?" he inquired.

"This cowhand," Joe grinned, "figures we're grazin' sheep on his range."

The blond-haired man pulled up within three feet of Cass. He spat, missing Cass's left boot by inches. He said,

"Get out. You're finished here."

Cass hit him full in the mouth, knocking him to his knees. The blond man gasped from the pain. He was slow reaching for the gun on his hip.

Cass had time to look at the two men with him, and to hear the soft slap of leather as Ad Phelps' gun cleared. Knowing that he was covered, he moved in very fast, kicking out with his right boot. The blond man's gun sailed through the air and he yelled from the pain in his wrist.

Cass pressed his boot against the man's chest, pushing hard, rolling his man over three times. He came up on his knees again, cursing savagely.

Cass caught him by the shirt front and yanked him to his feet. Holding him with one hand, Cass slapped him across the face a half dozen times with the other hand. He let go and the blond man lurched away.

"You want to pick up that gun now?" Cass asked coolly.

The blond man looked at the gun a few yards away, and then at the two dazed men with him. Phelps was still covering them.

Cass watched him turn and walk toward his horse. He said to the other two men,

"Move on."

Phelps was laughing, shoulders shaking, as the three men rode off without even looking back. The sheep herder looked nervous. He was sucking his teeth when Cass turned to him.

"Get those sheep moving and roll that damned wagon across the Creek."

"Wagon wheel's busted," the herder mumbled. "I can't move her."

"That's too bad," Cass murmured, and he walked forward and began to kick loose brush and firewood up against the side of the wagon. The herder stared as Cass bent down to strike a light and ignite the dry grass.

"Hell's Bell!" Phelps whispered. "This is like the old days!"

IN FIVE minutes the sheep wagon was blazing, and the herder had plodded off to round up his sheep and drive them across the Creek. Ad Phelps, looking ten years younger, said.

"What next, Benton? You ain't the man to waste time."

"Where do I find Halloran?" Cass wanted to know. "He owes me a hundred head of cattle."

"Not Halloran," Phelps reminded him. "Halloran's just another gunthrower. The Big Three hired Tip Halloran."

"We'll find Halloran first," Cass said. "I ran across him back in the west end of the valley earlier this morning."

"Might find him in town now," Phelps

grinned. "He'll be a mite surprised, your comin' to visit him, Benton."

"I'd be surprised myself," Cass observed dryly, "if I didn't visit him."

They came into Sentinel City an hour later, with the late afternoon sun coming over their shoulders, reddening the windows in the buildings along this straggling street.

The dust lay heavy in the road as they entered town. Cass had been through here before he'd been through a hundred like it—typical cow towns, rendezvous of the cattle men, only now there were very few cow men left. There were a half dozen saloons, quite empty at this early hour, a barber shop, two eating houses, the Cattleman's Hotel occupying the main corner, a brick building which housed the Sentinel City Bank, and just beyond the Bank, the brick jail house.

Cass said, "What about the law in the valley?"

"Ain't any," Phelps retorted. "Big Three bought out Ed Throwbridge. Ed still wears the star but he takes his orders from the Big Three. Ed's a peaceable man. When he saw that sheep was the power in the valley he turned into mutton. If the cattlemen ever git back in the saddle, Ed will switch the other way."

Cass grimaced.

"Don't see Halloran," Phelps said, looking over the bat-wing doors of several nearly empty saloons. "Reckon he ain't in yet."

There were a few horses tied at the racks. Halloran's dapple gray was not on the street.

Ad Phelps spat disdainfully toward a two-story building directly opposite the Bank. On the second floor of the building, in gold letters across a big window were the words,

CRANSTON, MacSWEEN; AND QUADE, INC.

There were three windows. Cass looked up and spotted a man staring down toward them. He was a tremendous figure, in a striped, English-cut suit, cigar gripped in his powerful jaws. He had a huge head, bullet-shaped, semi-bald; his massive jowls were clean-shaven, over-hanging, giving him a bull-dog appearance.

Phelps growled, "Jarvis Cranston, head man of the Big Three. Englishman."

Cass nodded. He said, "I need a shave. Meet you in the lunch room in an hour."

Standing in front of the mirror, slipping out of his vest, Cass saw three riders coming into town, the man in the lead was the blond-haired gun-swift he'd knocked down. The three men saw his horse at the rack. Two of them looked into the barber shop; the blond-haired man stared straight ahead.

Cass said, "Shave." He sat down and he watched the riders dismount in front of the Mustang Saloon.

The barber said, "New Quade man?"

"No," Cass told him.

The barber looked hard at the gun in the belt on the wallhook behind him. He didn't say anything.

IT WAS almost dark when Cass came out of the barber shop and crossed to the lunch room. He found Phelps waiting for him at the counter. The old puncher said quietly,

"Halloran came in five minutes ago. He's in the Opal Saloon."

Cass ate, taking the news with little concern. Phelps said to him,

"This damned town's full o' Quade men."

"You can stay here, Cass said. "I'll pick you up later."

"Like hell," Phelps retorted.

They went out on the walk. A rider was coming in toward the tie rack, lifting a hand to them. Cass made out the rider's face.

It was Della Grayson.

The girl ducked under the rack and came up in front of them.

"You're Mr. Benton, aren't you? New owner of Bar 7?"

"That's right," Cass said.

"I heard what happened over at Squaw Creek," the girl said. "You're inviting trouble, Mr. Benton."

"Big Three made the original invitation," Cass said. "I'm only accepting it."

Della Grayson smiled faintly. "You're a good man for this valley, Mr. Benton, but I'm afraid you came in too late. Father told me to tell you you can count on Running G if you get in trouble. We have four hands."

"I'll remember it," Cass said, "and thanks."

He touched his hat as the girl walked on. He said, "Which one is the Opal Saloon, Ad?"

Phelps hitched up his gunbelt. "Follow me," he said. They went past the bank, crossed the road, and Phelps nodded to the next saloon. Cass saw Halloran's dapple gray at the rack.

Cass spotted the side door as they passed an alley running between the Opal and the next building. He said,

"If you're in this, Ad, work in through that alley door. Back me up when I take on Halloran."

"My pleasure," Phelps grinned. "They work in threes. There'll be two boys with Halloran."

Cass pushed through the bat-wings. Halloran was standing at one end of the bar drinking with another man. The dozen or so men in the room looked toward the door when Cass came in.

Walking directly up to Halloran, Cass touched the man on the shoulder. The slim red-head came around, a slender Mexican *cigarillo* protruding from his lips. He grinned, recognizing Cass.

"You take my advice? You want to see Quade?"

"Reckon I'd like to see you first," Cass answered. He caught a glimpse of Phelps coming through the side door, taking a position along the wall. He spotted Halloran's two assistants at one of the card tables.

"See me?" Halloran asked in great surprise.

"Little matter of a hundred head of beef you boys ran off my place, and payment for the buildings you burned down. I'm the new owner of the Bar 7. You were spotted riding away from my place, Halloran, after the raid."

The red-head's eyes widened. He said softly, "You're the chap who burned that wagon on Squaw Creek, an' knocked Billy Ransom around."

"A hundred head," Cass said, "at seven dollars a head, makes seven hundred dollars, and another three hundred for the buildings. It comes to an even thousand."

Halloran turned around to face Cass completely. He had both elbows resting on the bar, and he was grinning broadly now. The man who had been drinking with him backed away.

A bartender slapped at the bar nervously, looked at Cass, and then moved to the other end of the bar.

"You want a thousand dollars from me?" Halloran repeated. "Ain't that nice. You want it in gold or in lead?"

Cass saw the fat-faced man coming away from the far wall, a star pinned on his vest. Throwbridge was a man of medium height, a kind of nervousness about him even as he walked. He had a habit of bringing his right hand up toward the star, rubbing it a little, dropping the hand, bringing it up again.

"Trouble, boys?" Throwbridge said.

"Sheriff, this is a friendly quarrel. You won't have to worry about it," Cass replied.

The red came into Throwbridge's face. He had a wide mouth with a brush of black mustache above it. He tried to make his voice sound crisp,

"I'm the law in this town, mister."

Cass rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "That so? I want a warrant made out for the arrest of this man. He was seen riding away from my ranch, moving behind a hundred head of my beef."

Throwbridge stood there, lifting the hand up toward the star as if trying to reassure himself that it was still there and he was still the law.

"You have witnesses?" he asked.

Ad Phelps said from the other wall, "I saw him, Halloran an' some of his boys went off with Sam's stock. Benton just bought out Sam."

"Now," Halloran murmured, "that was too bad."

Throwbridge looked as if he was sorry he'd stepped into the squabble. He said dubiously, "I'll see what I can do. Come over to the office, mister."

"I'll stay here," Cass told him. "I'm after money *tonight*, sheriff."

"Not mine," Halloran chuckled.

"Who sent you to rustle that stock?" Cass asked.

Halloran came away from the bar, relaxed, his right hand hanging near the pearl handle of his gun. He said wearily,

"I ain't Billy Ransom, friend. No man in the world is goin' to work on me with his fists." He was talking around the

Mexican cigarillo, making it wobble in his mouth. He said, "Now get the hell—,"

Cass slapped the cigar from his mouth, and with his right hand shoved Halloran back up against the bar. He heard Phelps yell suddenly,

"Don't touch them guns, boys."

Halloran was going for his gun when Cass grabbed his right wrist and yanked the arm up. He brought his body up close to Halloran as he was gripping the gun hand, and then suddenly shot his right shoulder up against Halloran's chin.

Halloran sagged and Cass snatched the man's gun. Stepping back, he tossed it over toward Ad Phelps who was still covering the two men at the card table.

Tip Halloran shook his head several times and he started to curse. Cass hit out with his right, catching Halloran on the cheekbone, knocking him along the bar. He followed the tall man, lashing at him with clean, swinging blows, driving him toward the far wall, past Ed Throwbridge.

Phelps called sharply, "Ed, you ain't in this any more. Stay where you are."

Silent, hard-faced men watched as Cass calmly backed Halloran against the wall.

Halloran's face was beaten to a pulp when he finally slumped to the floor, rolling over on his face. The two riders who had been with Halloran were watching from a table half a dozen yards away. One of them started to go to Halloran's assistance.

"Stay where you are, friend," Cass ordered.

The man sat down again.

Cass turned to the bartender,

"One beer."

Throwbridge said gruffly, "We don't like this kind of business in Sentinel City, Benton."

"You'll get used to it," Cass assured him. He downed the beer when the bartender slid it up to him, and he stood against the bar, elbows resting on the wood, watching Halloran rolling, shaking his head, climbing to his knees. When Halloran came off the floor, very shaky, Cass stood directly in front of him. He said, "Now who sent you to rustle my stock, Tip?"

The red-head blurted out, "Go to hell."

Cass hit him in the mouth, knocking him back against the wall again.

"Think hard, Tip."

A voice called out from the door, "Tip doesn't think too well, Mr. Benton."

Cass came around slowly. Three men were standing just inside the bat-wings, a small man in black in front, a thin-faced, slate-eyed man, very pale, his color accentuated by the dark hue of his clothing.

The big man, a little behind him, heavy smile on his bull-dog face was Jarvis Cranston, the Englishman. The third man, angular, sandy-haired, a long, sharp nose, cold blue eyes, Cass took to be MacSween, third man of the trio known as the Big Three.

The little man in black, a stub-nosed pistol in his hand, was Quade.

Phelps had been watching the fight and the two men at the table. He'd missed the entry of the Big Three, but he swung his gun on them quickly now, and snapped,

"Quade, you ain't in this."

Quade ignored him. He looked straight at Cass, the gun leveled on Cass's middle. He said,

"Halloran, get out."

III

HALLORAN groped around for his hat and stumbled toward the door.

Jarvis Cranston said, "He's pretty rough with his hands, Quade. I like a man like that."

Quade switched his glance to the hapless Throwbridge, standing against the wall, rubbing the star on his vest.

"Throwbridge, is that the kind of protection you give your citizens?"

"They had a gun on me," the Sheriff muttered.

Quade moved into the room, still ignoring Phelps who was holding a gun on him. Phelps said grimly,

"Damn it, Quade. I kin drop you with one bullet."

"Your Mr. Benton will be dead before that bullet strikes me, Phelps," Quade smiled. "Forget about it." He said to Cass, "What's your complaint, Benton?"

"One hundred head of cattle rustled from my range, two buildings burned to the ground, corral torn down. I'm after payment."

"From whom?" Quade murmured.

Cass grinned. "I damn near found out," he chuckled. He saw the smile of appre-

ciation slide across Cranston's wide face. McSween sniffed a little.

"I'd like to talk to this man alone," Cranston said. "Have him step in the back room, Quade."

Quade nodded toward a door. Phelps sang out,

"None o' that, boys. My gun's goin' in with him if you do."

Cass said, "Let it go, Ad." He walked toward the door, opened it, and went inside. He was in a small gambling room, a half dozen tables, a roulette wheel. The room was empty.

Cass sat down. He watched Quade, Cranston and MacSween come in. MacSween closed the door.

Cranston said to Quade,

"Put that damned gun away." He tossed a cigar to Cass, and Cass caught it deftly, bit off the end, and inserted it in his mouth.

"How much did you lose over at Bar 7?," Cranston asked.

"I'd figure a thousand dollars worth of property," Cass said promptly.

Cranston took out a check book and placed it on the table in front of him. He said, "We might make a little deal, Benton. I like the way you work. You've heard of us?"

Cass smiled. "You've done pretty well in six months. When I passed through here last fall this was all cattle country."

Cranston waved a big hand. "A beginning," he grinned, "one valley. We'll have half the state in another six months. There's big money in sheep if you handle enough of them."

Cass Benton said gently, "That so?" His eyes were somewhat colder as he listened to this big man sitting at the other table. He was thinking of the dozens of little ranchers like himself, like Grayson, who would have to go under if the Big Three went outside of Sentinel Valley and continued with these tactics.

"Halloran's been our head man in the valley," Cranston was saying, "but he's not as tough as we thought he was. When we move beyond this valley we'll be needing someone else to handle our boys. I'm paying you your thousand now, and three hundred a month to take over Halloran's job."

He was opening the check book, assuming the matter was settled. Cass said quietly,

"I'm a cowman, Cranston."

Cranston shrugged massive shoulders. "Stay away from the damned sheep then. I don't like the smell of them myself."

"I don't like the stink of the people behind them," Cass added.

Quade said,

"You're a fool, Benton. That's big money in these parts."

"I came to Sentinel Valley to run beef," Cass said.

"You haven't a cow left on your range," Cranston snapped, "nor a building, and if I'm not mistaken, not a cent in your pockets."

"I'm still raising beef," Cass said patiently.

Cranston snapped the check book shut. "I didn't take you for a damned fool, Benton. If you try to buck us you won't be able to borrow a dime in this town to get back on your feet. You're whipped now."

"We'll see," Cass said. He slipped off the table and started for the door. He paused and looked back. "I ran some of your sheep off my range this afternoon. I hope I don't find any more there tomorrow."

"You might," Cranston grated.

"Don't send Tip Halloran to back up your play," Cass stated, "because the next time I won't use my hands on him."

"You talk big, friend," Quade observed.

"My gun," Cass told him, patting the Navy Colt on his hip, "is bigger." He went out. Finding Ad Phelps at the bar, they walked out into the night together. Phelps said.

"So they wanted to buy you."

Cass nodded.

Ad Phelps looked at him intently. "Reckon you know what you're doin', Benton," he said. "You got Big Three on yore neck from now on, an' Tip Halloran won't rest now till he sees if you're as fast with a six-gun as you are with yore fists."

"I'll watch Halloran," Cass stated. He had another problem right now—a bigger one. He had his range, but no stock on it, and the Big Three had flatly told him he wouldn't be able to borrow money in Sentinel City to go back into business. Cranston, MacSween and Quade ran the town now; it was their money which had brought a kind of prosperity to the former cow

town, and the local banker wouldn't dare go against them.

"If you're figurin' on raisin' money," Phelps said shrewdly, "only man you'll git it from is old Skin-Flint Adams up in Skull Canyon."

"Skin-Flint Adams?"

"Old desert rat," Phelps explained," made his pile in silver ten years ago, an' then come up here to live. Hates sheep like all hell. He'll loan money to any cattleman who'll buck Big Three."

"How do I get to Skull Canyon?" Cass wanted to know.

"Git a letter from Tom Grayson first," Phelps said. "Skin-Flint don't hand it out to any drifter. You'll find Grayson in the Cattleman's Hotel. Skull Canyon's ten miles east, runnin' off Sentinel Valley. Silver Creek runs out of it inot Eagle Silver Creek runs out of it into Eagle River. Skin-Flint's got a shack up there, but he keeps all his money in the Sentinel bank."

"I'll see Grayson," Cass said.

THEY found the rancher in the lobby of the hotel, talking with several other men. He smiled when Cass came up.

"This town's talking about you, Benton," he chuckled. "You're a tonic to the cattlemen."

Grayson was a tall man, iron-gray hair, steady gray eyes. He looked like a man who'd had his troubles, but he hadn't broken under them. Cass learned later that he'd been cleaned out twice by blizzards, but he was still raising beef—one of the few ranchers willing to fight the Big Three.

When Cass explained his mission, Grayson steered him toward the bar for a drink.

Cass caught a glimpse of Della Grayson walking across the lobby as he pushed through the bat-wings. The girl waved to him.

"You'll get your money," Grayson said as he was pouring two drinks. "You'll get it from Adams after he hears how you've handled some of the Big Three men."

"I figure on stocking a hundred head," Cass said. "I had that many run off on me before I reached the valley."

"They'll try to run this bunch off, too," Grayson told him.

"I'm here now," Cass murmured. "They can try."

Grayson got pen and ink, sat down at one of the tables, and wrote out the note. He said, "You can take Skin-Flint's check and push right on to Boulder Creek another dozen miles out of the valley. You'll find cattle raisers there who will accommodate you, and Skin-Flint's check is good in any part of the state."

"I have no collateral," Cass pointed out. "They burned my place."

"You won't need collateral with Skin-Flint Adams," Grayson told him. "Just spit every time you mention sheep. He's a little touched that way."

Cass tucked the note carefully in his shirt pocket, shook hands with Tom Grayson, and went out. He found Ad Phelps waiting for him. He said,

"Can you get to Boulder Creek and contact a cattle raiser over there. Order a hundred head. I'll pay for them when I arrive."

"You don't waste time," Phelps observed. "I was goin' to tell you to git up to Skin-Flint's place tonight. They'll be watchin' you in the mornin', and you might have trouble."

"We'll ride out of town," Cass told him, "as if we were going back to our place."

"The rockin' chair," Phelps chuckled, "is all the damn place we got, Cass, but it's home."

"I'll get the money from Adams," Case went on, "and move right over to Boulder Creek. We'll hole up there tonight and bring our stock back in the morning."

"An' keep an eye out for Tip Halloran an' maybe Billy Ransom, too," Phelps warned. "Halloran's got to make good on that beatin', or he's through in this country."

"I'll watch them," Cass nodded. He saw Sheriff Throwbridge moving up toward them.

Throwbridge pulled up in front of them. He looked straight at Cass.

"Benton, you've had your little play, and maybe you feel better now. Why not be a wise man and pull out of here."

It was no threat; it was kindly advice. Throwbridge didn't want to see him go under like so many other men who'd tried to fight the Big Three.

"Reckon I'll stick around," Cass smiled. "I'd say you were the one should pull out, Ed. You look sick." He walked off, leaving the sheriff staring after him.

"I used to like Ed," Phelps said.

A crescent moon was sliding up over the south rim of the valley wall as they took the road out of Sentinel City, moving over a small wooden bridge across Eagle River.

Phelps said, "keep close to the north wall o' the valley. Second canyon you hit is Skull Canyon. Skin-Flint's shack is about a mile in, along the Creek there."

"I'll find it," Cass said.

They parted a mile out of town, Phelps riding due north in the direction of Boulder Creek, and Cass continuing on down the single road which led through the valley.

He passed a sheepherder's wagon parked in a grove a short distance off the road, and he caught the smell of the sheep beyond. Leaving the road, he went up into the timber, following an old corduroy road, and then came out onto open range again.

Instead of heading out across the range, he stopped just off the old timber road to make a smoke. He was sitting astride the big bay, watching the way the moonlight played on the river below, when he heard the soft thud of horses' hoofs on the old logs.

Rubbing out the cigarette, he backed the bay in among the trees, slipped his .44 from the holster, and waited. He was in the shadows and he could see any one coming up the road, but they could not see him. He was thinking of Phelps' warning concerning Halloran.

The horses down in the hollow below stopped for a moment, and then came on again. Moonlight sifting down through the tree tops revealed two riders. The man in the lead was Halloran. There was enough light so that Cass could see the white adhesive tape on the man's face where he'd been cut in the fight earlier in the evening.

The man with Halloran was the blonde-haired Billy Ransom, still bitter over he beating he'd received at the hands of the new Bar 7 owner.

Cass watched them coming up.

When Halloran was almost abreast of the spot where Cass was sitting, Cass called,

"That you, Halloran?"

Halloran let out a hoarse ejaculation as he pulled up the dapple gray. Ransom, who was riding about half a dozen yards behind the red-head, reined in his horse so suddenly that the animal started to buck.

"You're a long way from home, Tip," Cass said. "Pretty dangerous business trailing a man on a moonlight night. Reckon I could have dropped both of you down in the hollow."

"That so," Halloran rasped.

He sat astride the dapple gray, half-facing Cass. Billy Ransom brought the chestnut under control.

"You following me, Tip?" Cass asked.

"I might be," Halloran told him, and the way he said it Cass could see that he was analyzing his chances. He could see the gun in Cass's hand, the moonlight reflecting on the steel barrel. They were about thirty feet apart. Halloran turned his horse a little more, giving Cass an even smaller target, and by this small move Cass knew that Halloran was playing out the string.

Cass Benton said softly, "I'm still here, Tip." He dropped the six-gun back into the holster then, and he sat there, the bay horse motionless, as if knowing the slightest movement might mean death to its owner.

Cass counted three before he saw Halloran's hand move. He was wondering about Ransom, not sure whether the blond would throw in with Halloran under these circumstances. The licking Ransom had taken had done something to him. He was ready to shoot at a man from a distance when that man wasn't expecting a shot. Standing up against him, at thirty or forty feet, was another matter.

Halloran's gun muzzle was nearly clear of the holster when Cass threw his first shot. He saw Halloran's shoulders jerk and he swiveled the gun on Ransom without firing again. The blond-haired man sat astride his horse as if petrified, making no move to go for his gun.

Halloran got his gun out. He brought it up, waveringly, as he started to sway in the saddle. He fell out of the saddle. His body struck the earth with a sickening thud.

"Better pick him up, Ransom, and take him home," Cass said.

Ransom slid out of the saddle and knelt down beside Halloran. Cass watched him from the saddle.

Ransom said thickly, "He's dead."

Cass nodded. He didn't say anything. He watched Ransom lift the dead man across the saddle of the dapple gray, tie him, and then lead the gray back toward his own horse. No more words were spoken. Ransom mounted and turned down the corduroy road.

IV

IT WAS nearly eleven o'clock at night when Cass reached Skull Canyon, and spotted a tiny light up the canyon that marked Skin-Flint Adams' shack.

In another fifteen minutes he was sitting inside the shack, drinking hot coffee, and watching Adams spell out each word as he read the letter.

Skin-Flint Adams was nearly eighty, but his mind was still good. Why he preferred living up in Skull Canyon when he could have had a beautiful town home, no one knew. Adams had made his pile and then discovered that the greatest joy had come from making it. He'd acquired no tastes; he wanted no luxuries.

"Grayson says you had it out with that toad, Halloran," Adams chuckled. "He's been ridin' around here like the king o' spades fer five months."

"He won't ride any more," Cass observed.

The old man looked at him quickly. "Why in hell not?"

"He's dead. He followed me out of Sentinel City tonight. He wanted a showdown."

The old man scratched his grizzled chin. "How much you want, Benton?"

"A thousand dollars will put me on my feet. I can start paying you back in the fall."

Skin-Flint Adams waved a hand at him. "Pay back them damn sheep raisers," he growled. "Thirty years ago I said I was goin' to settle in this valley after I made my pile. I made it, an' I come back, an' then they bring sheep in. They got a flock of 'em a mile back in the canyon here, foulin' my damn water."

The old man wrote out a check.

Cass put the slip of paper in his pocket and he stood up.

"I'm obliged to you, Mr. Adams."

"Skin-Flint's the name," the old man growled.

Cass smiled, shook hands and left. In another hour he was moving down the main street of Boulder Creek. There was a saloon called the Black Stallion where Ad Phelps had said he'd be waiting.

Boulder Creek was smaller than Sentinel City.

The Black Stallion Saloon was fairly crowded, and Cass spotted Phelps at the bar with a tall, gray-haired man whom he introduced as Carson Kane, owner of the Slash K.

"I have a hundred head for you," Kane said, "if you can show me Skin-Flint's check."

The deal was consummated in less than an hour, and Cass and Phelps went out to Kane's place, bunked there for the night, and left an hour after dawn with the hundred head Kane's riders cut out for them.

During the night Cass told Phelps of the affair with Halloran. The old man shook his head soberly.

"There'll be hell to pay back in the valley, Cass. Big Three ain't lettin' that go by."

"We'll see," Cass smiled grimly.

They were moving the stock into the valley and up toward the Bar 7 range by noon. Passing the Grayson place, Cass saw a rider hurrying toward them. He let Phelps go on with the stock and he waited, recognizing Della Grayson.

The girl pulled up in front of him.

"Ed Throwbridge is looking for you with a posse. Ransom claims you shot Halloran down before he went for his gun. He has Halloran's gun to prove it hadn't been fired."

Cass rubbed the pommel of his saddle. He said thoughtfully,

"Ransom has lived too long in this world."

"He'll live longer than you will," Della told him, "if you don't hole up before Throwbridge gets here."

"If Throwbridge wants fight he'll have it," Cass stated.

"Throwbridge will have eight Big Three gun-throwers with him," Della observed. "A man's a fool to fight under those cir-

cumstances. You can hole up at our place."

Cass shook his head. "They'd look there first. I don't want to draw fire on you. If you can fix me up a few days supply of food I'll move up on the north rim of the valley. It's pretty rought country there and they'll have a time finding me."

Della nodded. "Might be the best thing," she said. "I'll have your pack ready when you return. Better go ahead and tell Phelps." She wheeled her horse and rode back toward the ranch house.

Cass had a few words with Phelps. The little puncher said grimly,

"So they got you on a killin' charge. I figured it would be somethin' like that. Wonder how much the Big Three paid Ransom to tell that story."

"Ransom won't enjoy that money," Cass murmured. "Keep an eye on this stock, Ad. Reckon I'll be close enough to help if they should try to run it off."

"I'll sleep with 'em," Phelps growled. "Take care o' yourself, Cass."

CASS RODE back to the Grayson h, and found Della waiting with two crammed saddlebags.

"The posse been through this way yet?" Cass asked.

"Passed here two hours ago," Della told him. "They were heading up toward Skull Canyon, trying to pick up your trail. Be careful, Cass."

Cass looked at her steadily. He saw the red come into her face, and he said, "I'll watch it, Della." He had a nice feeling as he rode away; the feeling a man has when someone is worried about him. It had been a long time since someone worried about him.

He made his noon-day camp in the tall timber. He built a small, smokeless fire down in a hollow, boiled his coffee and fried some bacon.

Later in the afternoon he found the spot he was looking for. He was out of the timber, moving along the rim, walking the bay in and out among huge boulders. There was an indentation, large enough for a man and horse to be concealed. He tethered the horse in the hollow and then crawled up on a flat rock which overlooked the valley. He could see his own range, and the small herd of cattle he brought in that morning. Closer at hand he could see the Grayson spread, tiny, toy buildings, small puffs of dust where riders were moving across the range.

A larger body of riders was coming out of the timber to the east, in the direction of Skull Canyon. Cass watched them for some time until they were lost over a crest. They had been moving in the direction of Sentinel City, and they undoubtedly comprised the posse. It meant that the posse was going back, breaking up temporarily, and the real danger was over. They may have assumed that he'd skipped the country.

Cass waited till dusk and headed for Sentinel City.

He entered the town from the west end instead of crossing the bridge over Eagle River, and he turned up the first alley he came to, tying the bay in a vacant lot.

He walked down the main street, managing to keep in the shadows until he came to the jailhouse.

The jailhouse was a short distance beyond the lighted area of the town. Gun in hand, he went up the three short steps and pushed through the door.

Sheriff Ed Throwbridge was alone. He was sitting at his desk, hat on the back of his head, facing the door. He held a six-gun in his hand, and the muzzle of the gun was trained directly on Cass's stomach. The gun barrel was held steady on the rim of the desk, and the hammer cocked.

Instinctively, Cass lowered the muzzle of his own gun so that it was trained on Throwbridge's forehead. He saw the small bead of perspiration on Throwbridge's forehead. Yet the lawman was smiling.

For several moments neither man spoke. Cass said finally,

"Now who is surprising who here?"

Throwbridge shifted his weight a little in the chair. The smile was a little broader; he looked a little more relieved.

"By the damndest coincidence, Benton, I spotted you comin' out of that alley a few minutes ago. I figured you'd be headin' this way."

"Why?"

"You're that kind of man," Throwbridge said slowly, "the kind of man I wish to hell I was. Now what do you want with me? You know damned well it wasn't my idea to organize a posse and track you down."

"Thought we'd go see Ransom," Cass said. "I'd like to hear his story of the fight, personally."

"You shot Halloran in self-defense," Throwbridge said quietly. "I figgured that."

"Yet you took a posse out to run me down like a mad dog."

The red came into Throwbridge's fat face. He let the barrel of the gun slide down till it was out of sight.

"A man don't change overnight, Benton, an' I've been takin' Big Three money for a long time. I did a hell of a lot o' thinkin' on the way back from that ride."

Cass slid his own gun back into the holster. He said. "You a family man, Throwbridge?"

"Two kids," Throwbridge told him, "but I'm not hidin' behind that. I'd o' thrown in with Big Three even if I didn't have any worries. You want to look up Ransom now? I'll go along with you."

Cass nodded.

"Where would Ransom be, Sheriff?"

"Opal Saloon. He was out with the posse. I left him there, braggin' like hell how he run you out o' the valley."

"Reckon I'll step over to the Opal," Cass said.

"You'll find some Big Three boys over there."

Cass looked at him. "You backing their play?"

"No," Throwbridge said.

Cass crossed the road, walked the half block to the Opal without being seen, and entered the saloon. Ransom was at one of the card tables, his back toward the door, when Cass came in.

A squint-eyed man with an lantern-jaw, who had been with Ransom at the sheepherder's wagon, spotted Cass first. He was drinking, the glass up to his mouth, his back to the bar, when he saw Cass. He gulped, motioned frantically with his hands to Ransom, and then started to back away along the bar.

Ransom spun around in his chair, his right hand dropping toward the gun on his hip. His fingers were entwined around the handle when Cass's voice reached him.

"Bring it out, Billy."

Ransom's face lost color. He sat there, half turned in his chair. His eyes moved around the room, coming to a stop at another table. Cass saw Quade sitting there, watching him coolly.

Quade said, "Benton, the Sheriff is looking for you."

"I saw him," Cass stated. He looked again at Ransom. The room was quite filled, some Big Three hands, the rest townsmen, the peaceful men who had no use for Big Three. Cass stood with his back to the swinging doors. He could hear the squeak as they swung gently behind him, still moving from the momentum of his push. He said, "Billy, tell the boys what happened last night."

Ransom licked thin lips nervously. He glanced at Quade as if for assurance, and then he snapped,

"THIS town knows that story, Benton."

"I'd like to hear it," Cass said gently. "I want to hear how you tell it, Billy, and it had better be straight."

Quade said from his chair, "There are a half dozen Big Three men in this room, Benton. Get wise to yourself." The pasteboards still in his hand.

"I'm talking to Ransom," Cass said, never taking his eyes from the blond man. "Billy will be dead right after the first Big Three man goes for his gun. You don't want to die, do you, Billy?"

Ransom choked. He didn't like the situation. Cass could see it in his pale blue eyes. Ransom had seen him draw on Halloran.

Cass said to Quade without looking at him, "Your boys might get me, Quade, but I'll have Ransom to go with me, won't I, Billy?"

"So to hell with Billy Ransom," Quade smiled.

Ransom's young face twisted. His hand came away from the gun. He spun around, facing Quade. He snarled,

"You want it that way, Quade? Halloran tried to shoot it out with this gent. He went for his gun first and Benton beat him to the draw." Beads of perspiration stood out on his face. He finished slowly, "I was paid to tell a different story. You want any more, Quade?"

"That'll be enough, Billy," Quade observed. There was almost a touch of sadness in his voice.

Cass heard the step on the porch behind him. He backed against the wall and

saw Throwbridge come in. Throwbridge looked like a different man. He wasn't reaching up to touch the star on his vest. He stood there, just inside the doors, rocking on his heels and soles.

"Trouble, boys?," he said gently.

"There's a murder charge against this man, Sheriff," Quade said, nodding toward Cass. "He's just managed to wring a crooked confession out of Billy Ransom, but that murder charge still holds. Arrest him, Throwbridge."

Throwbridge shook his head. "I heard Billy's story," he murmured, "an' it's good enough for me. Billy told the truth the second time."

Quade's slate-colored eyes widened. He didn't say anything for several moments, and then he said softly,

"Throwbridge, tell this town how much I've been paying you each month since I came to this town."

Throwbridge went deadly pale. He said, "You'll have every dirty dollar back in the morning, Quade. From now on this town has law."

Cass said, "Ransom, you better head for the high places."

Ransom got up and hurried through the door. Cass heard his boots on the porch.

Quade was looking around the room, at the Big Three men, watching silently, intently, at the bar, along the wall. For one moment Cass thought the little man in black was going to give them the sign to open up on the two men at the door. Sentinel City townsmen thought the same thing. A number of them started to move toward the side door. The bartender ducked slowly out of sight behind the bar.

Quade said jeeringly, "It's a nice thing to see a crooked man go honest, Sheriff, but don't try any of that honesty on me. It won't work."

"We'll see," Throwbridge said. "Keep your boys in line from now on, Quade. I'm warning you."

The bad moment passed, and Cass knew that for the time being there would be no gunplay. He'd been watching Quade intently, determined to throw the first lead in Quade's direction. Quade was undoubtedly aware of this.

Throwbridge glanced at Cass, and Cass, heeding the sign, stepped outside. Throwbridge followed him, looking up and down the street. Cass said, "Thanks for the help, Sheriff. Better get to Ransom now before Quade does, or you'll have a corpse on your hands."

Two shots rang out from the west end of town. Thorwbridge started running. Cass called after him,

"Too late, Ed." He started to go down the steps when he heard Quade's voice from the door.

"Did I hear shooting?" Quade asked mockingly.

"Your guns," Cass told him, "murdering Billy Ransom. Don't send your dogs after me, Quade."

"I won't send dogs," Quade grinned, "I'll send sheep—ten thousand of them over Squaw Creek before sunset tomorrow night, backed by twenty-five of my riders. What do you think of that, Benton?"

"The first sheep I see on my side of the Creek," Cass told him, "I'm coming after you, Quade."

"You might be dead," Quade chuckled. "Think on that, my friend."

"I'll take somebody with me," Cass said flatly. He walked off then in the direction of the alley where he'd left the bay. He met Ed Throwbridge coming out of the alley which led to the Bascom Livery Stables. Cass said, "Well?"

"Billy Ransom," Throwbridge said quietly, "shot through the back in the alley as he was goin' for his horse. Two bullets. He didn't use his gun."

Cass said, "What did you expect, Sheriff?"

"I'd say," Throwbridge murmured, "that it'll be gettin' pretty rough around here from now on, Benton."

"Watch your own step," Cass warned him. "Those boys aren't worrying about a star. A star is to shoot at."

Throwbridge said stubbornly, "I'm in this now to the finish."

"Big Three are running sheep over Squaw Creek tomorrow," Cass told him, "on to my range. Quade says he's backing his play with every gun hand he has on his payroll."

"I expected that," Throwbridge nodded. "They'll want to break you first so the valley can see it won't pay to buck them." He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, and he said, "You have Phelps and yourself. I think Tom Grayson will throw in with you.

Grayson has four or five riders. I might be able to deputize two or three boys in this town. That'll give us ten or eleven against Big Three's two dozen sidewinders, and only you in our crowd able to match any of 'em."

"I don't like to pull Grayson into this," Cass said. "They haven't touched him yet."

"You couldn't keep Grayson out of a fight." Throwbridge stated. "I know him. He's been waitin' for a showdown. He'll back your play, Benton."

"We'll see who backs it tomorrow," Cass smiled. He rode directly to his own range. He found Ad Phelps with the new stock bedded down. The old puncher was riding around the herd. Winchester across his saddle.

"Quiet night so far," he growled.

"Reckon you won't have any trouble tonight," Cass said. "The showdown is tomorrow." He explained what had taken place in Sentinel City, Phelps listening intently.

"That's it," Phelps nodded when he'd finished. "There'll be hell to pay tomorrow, Cass."

"I want to have a look at Squaw Creek the first thing in the morning," Cass told him. "We'll take turns watching tonight. Get yourself a few hours sleep now, Ad."

Phelps built a small fire up near the timber a hundred yards away, and then rolled himself in his blanket. Cass let him sleep an hour or two over the time limit before waking him. Phelps got up growling, and Cass had a few hours sleep before morning.

V

IT WAS an uneventful night, and in the morning they left the stock for a while and rode over to Squaw Creek. Cass studied the little body of water for some time in silence. It was about twenty-five yards across, sandy banks on either side, timber along the south bank which was Cass's side of the creek.

"Where would a man ford sheep?" Cass wanted to know.

Phelps pointed to a spot a quarter mile up-creek. It was very near the place where Cass had burned the sheepherder's wagon. There was a small sand bar in the creek, and the water was very shallow.

"Only place," Phelps stated. "Damned Creek's too deep anywhere else They'll come across on that bar, Cass."

They heard a horse coming down along the river. Cass recognized Della. The girl pulled up near them.

"Father's coming up with four men. We're in this fight."

"They'll burn your father out if they get across here," Cass told her. "He know that?"

"He knows it," Della smiled, "and he's still coming. Made any plans yet? "

"Looking it over," Cass said. "At least we have the timber on our side. We'll have cover where they won't."

Ad Phelps made a noise in his throat. "You got a hell of a lot o' cover," he observed, "when you're ridin' behind ten thousand sheep. They'll raise enough dust that side o' the creek to hide everything within a mile o' the water."

"If they start to drive them straight across here," Della said, "there'll be so much confusion we won't be in a position to stop the Big Three riders when they cross behind the sheep and you can't stop the sheep from coming over. They'll just keep piling up if they're driven from behind.

Cass was looking at the almost motionless water. He said, "Anything sheep are afraid of, Ad?"

"Too damned dumb to be afraid o' anything, "Phelps growled, "exceptin' maybe fire, but a river don't burn."

"Fire," Cass repeated.

"A river don't burn," Ad Phelps reminded him, "an' you ain't burnin' this green timber right now either."

"Maybe," Cass said, "we can make the river burn, Ad."

Phelps stared at him, opened his mouth to speak, and then turned to watch three riders coming along the far bank of the Creek. They splashed across the water at the fording place. Ed Throwbridge was in the lead.

"Throwbridge even rides different," Phelps grinned. "I'm glad to see that."

Throwbridge spoke out:

"Every Big Three hand left Sentinel City this mornin'. I understand Quade an' Cranston have been bringin' a half dozen o' their flocks together up at the west end o' the valley an' they'll be movin' this

way some time in the afternoon."

Phelps said, "Grayson is comin' up."

Cass turned in the saddle to look. Five riders were moving toward them. Grayson lifted a hand to him as they came down along the creek.

"Ten of us," Throwbridge scowled, "an' the girl. The odds ain't good, Benton."

Tom Grayson said, "One of my riders spotted them running flocks together up near Elders' Creek. They'll make their crossing here, Benton. You ready for them?"

"We have ten guns," Cass said.

"Eleven," Della corrected.

Cass looked at her and smiled. "I don't want to risk a straight fight. They'll be too tough for us."

"He wants to burn the river," Della explained to her father.

Grayson stared from his daughter to Cass and then back again. He opened his mouth and then closed it.

Cass was grinning. "You have any oil?" he asked. "Lamp oil?"

Grayson started to grin, also. He was looking at the fording place. He said,

"You're afraid of those Big Three sheep piling across here, with Big Three riders coming hell-for-leather behind them."

"That's right," Cass said. "A barrel of oil might scare them away if we use it right."

"Reckon I have a barrel," Grayson chuckled. "I'll have two of the boys bring it up in the buckboard."

Phelps was staring at the two men. "You—you figure on pourin' that oil on the Creek at the ford an' lightin' it up?"

"That's it," Cass nodded. "They'll never be able to drive sheep into the water then."

"Won't stop Big Three gun-slingers from comin' across," Phelps told him. "They'll head down river a way an' come across where there ain't no fire."

"We'll try to be ready for them," Cass said.

Grayson sent two of his riders off for the oil barrel, and then he rode along the Creek a short distance, looking over the territory.

Throwbridge and Phelps went along. They moved through the timber and around a bend in the creek. Cass found the spot he was looking for—a section of the Creek where the distance was less than fifteen yards.

Phelps rode his horse out to test the depth. The water came up to the stirrups.

"We'll cross here," Cass said, "after we get the creek burning. We'll hit Big Three on the left flank as they come up behind the sheep. They won't be expecting us."

Throwbridge nodded emphatically. "Rather do it that way," he said, "than wait for 'em to come 'an get us."

They went back to the fording place and Cass explained the plan to the others.

"We'll keep two men in the timber here, sending a steady stream of fire over the creek to make Big Three riders think the main fight is here. The rest of us will cross the creek farther up, swing in on their flank, and hit them hard as they're coming up behind the sheep."

Grayson said, "We'll need every man if we make an attack. I'd suggest keeping Della here with a rifle. She can remain hidden and still keep firing without too much danger. She wouldn't stay home anyway."

Cass looked at the girl. "Any use arguing with you?" he asked.

"I'm staying," Della told him flatly. "I think I can send enough shots across the creek to make them think we're still here."

Cass nodded. "We'll all keep out of sight when the sheep approach. We can have the oil already spilled on the surface, and I'll toss a burning faggot onto the water as they're moving up."

Grayson's men came up with the buckboard and a large barrel of oil. The barrel was rolled down to the water's edge and overturned so that the oil flowed out over the surface.

Cass watched it spread. He said quietly, I think we're ready now."

THE sheep came in sight at four o'clock in the afternoon. They could hear the noise and they caught the smell long before the woolies poured over a summit a mile on the other side of Squaw Creek, and rolled down the slope, the dull gray color blotting out the tawny brown of the range.

There was dust behind and on either side of the huge flock. The steady, mo-

notonous bleating became maddening as they drew closer. Crouched near a small fire in the brush on the other side of the Creek, Cass watched.

Della was stationed a short distance back in the timber, Winchester and Colt loaded, ready to open fire. The nine men were mounted farther back.

Cass could see riders far back at the edges of the flock as it came down the slope. Then he lost them in the clouds of yellow dust raised by the moving sheep.

They were within two hundred yards of the creek now, pushed on by the shouts and shooting of the drovers. This was the show of strength to convince the valley that the Big Three was here to stay. The fact that Quade and Cranston, himself, were with the flocks was an indication of the importance they placed on the success of this drive.

Cass reached for a burning faggot when the sheep were one hundred yards from the Creek. They were being pointed now, narrowed down so that they could make the crossing at the fording place where the water was only a foot deep.

When the lead sheep were within twenty-five yards of the creek, Cass ran down to the edge of the water, and tossed the burning torch into the water.

There was a hissing sound, and then a great flash of flame. The fire spread out to the sand bar. The nearest sheep trotting down the slope stopped and stared stupidly. They were pushed forward by the pressure from behind—pushed closer and closer to the flaming creek.

The sheep up front tried to turn and double back into the flock coming down at them, and the result was a wild milling which forced some of them out into the water. Fortunately, the oil hadn't extended all the way to the shore, and they were able to scramble out before they were burned, but the column moving down toward the creek split, breaking through the herders who were plodding along on either side, urging them toward the fording place.

Cass heard Della Grayson's Winchester crackle. The bullets sang over his head as he plunged back through the timber to where the nine men were waiting.

Ad Phelps was holding the bay. Cass hit the saddle, whirled the big horse around, and sped up along the creek, keeping behind the protecting wall of timber. Downcreek he could hear the bleating of the sheep and the shouts of the befuddled herders.

"Damned fire stopped 'em all right." Phelps yelled.

Cass nodded, remembering that it wouldn't stop them for good. The Big Three would have their sheep over the Creek by nightfall if they weren't stopped for good within the next few minutes.

Ed Throwbridge was coming up alongside Cass as they broke through the timber, moving up toward, the fording place Cass had selected. Throwbridge yelled,

"Be hell to pay if them hombres decide to cross the creek down below an' charge Miss Grayson."

A cold chill swept through Cass and he was almost tempted to pull up then and send a few men back. The girl was still firing from the timber directly behind the burning creek. He could hear the Winchester and then the bang of the Colt as Della alternated each weapon. He dreaded to think what would happen if Big Three gun hands *did* make a crossing of the creek somewhere down below, and came in on that thicket, blasting it to pieces before they could discover who was doing the firing.

Ad Phelps, who was closer to the creek, suddenly drove away these thoughts. The bleating of thousands of frightened sheep down below almost drowned out Phelps' yell of alarm, but he was pointing with his finger. Cass looked in that direction.

They could see the creek again, less than fifty yards ahead, the fording place Cass had selected, and riders were coming through the water—Big Three riders!

Throwbridge was pulling up his mount, but Cass slid his gun out and plunged forward. Phelps roared,

"Get 'em!"

Throwbridge and his two deputies followed. Grayson and his riders came up behind Throwbridge, and they hit the gunpack just as they were emerging from the creek.

Cass broke through the timber, charging straight for the hired gun hands. They spotted him, recognized him, and one man fired hastily. Cass dropped that man from the saddle with his first shot.

Grayson and his riders swept around in a semi-circle, hitting the Big Three men from another angle, coming at them, guns banging. Two more Big Three riders slipped from their saddles. Another man turned his horse and tried to plunge back into the water and gain the other side. He was knocked down as his horse reared.

The remaining men were fighting back. One of Throwbridge's deputies clutched at his shoulder and slid from the saddle. Cass saw blood on Phelps' right cheek as the man fled past him, firing, dropping another Big Three hand.

"They got enough!" Grayson yelled suddenly.

Cass had swerved his horse away from the group of men at the creek. He came in again now, seeing them ready to break. They'd been caught in a bad spot coming out of the water. There was no cover along the water's edge, and Cass's men were still able to keep partially concealed in the timber.

A CONCERTED rush now by the cattlemen sent the remaining Big Three riders up along the Creek, moving as fast as they could. Cass counted them quickly. Five men had been put out of the fight. Seven were moving off, but that left at least a dozen or more hands unaccounted for.

Phelps said suddenly, "Where in hell is Throwbridge?"

For the first time Cass discovered that the sheriff had not been in this fight. Phelps said,

"Damn him! He run out, Cass." He spat and he added, "Reckon Throwbridge never did like the sound o' lead."

Cass was concerned now with another problem—one much more important than Throwbridge's apparent desertion. Where were the other Big Three riders?

Tom Grayson supplied the answer. The rancher was listening, head cocked, trying to hear something above the bleating of the sheep downcreek, and then Cass heard it, and he knew where Quade, Cranston, and the remaining gunslingers were.

"Della!" Grayson whispered.

Cass whirled the big bay and shot back into the timber. He was remembering then that it was Throwbridge who had thought of this first—the possibility of a Big Three crossing downcreek, and then a drive at the supposed defense of the cattlemen.

Quade and Cranston had worked it somewhat differently. They'd split their force, sending the smaller body upcreek, where they'd run into the cattlemen. The remaining men were now storming the thicket where Della was concealed. Cass could hear the crackle of the guns as he gave his spurs to the powerful animal beneath him.

Frightened, surprised, the big bay leaped forward like a deer, leaving the other riders behind him. It was nearly a mile back along the creek to the burning fording place. Cass made it in record time.

Quade and his men were closing in on the thicket when he came up, the smell of burning oil and sheep in his nostrils. He could see riders driving in toward the spot where Della had been crouching when he'd left her. They were coming at a hard gallop, more than a dozen of them. Quade was in the center of the fan, six-gun in hand.

And then Cass saw a figure getting up from the pile of brush where Della had been. The figure was not that of the girl. It was a man—a bulky man in gray flannel shirt and black vest. On the front of that vest was pinned a five-pointed star. Cass couldn't see the front of the vest because Throwbridge had his back to him; he was facing the oncoming Big Three riders, a gun in each hand.

A man on the left wing fired and Throwbridge's hat fell from his head. Throwbridge dropped that man with his first shot. He got Quade with the second one, turning his gun on the little man in black, sending his second bullet at him just before he was hit himself.

Cass, shooting forward as fast as the bay could go, saw Throwbridge drop to his knees. He'd been whirled around a little by the impact of the bullet, but he was still in the fight.

On his knees he fired—first one gun and then the other. Quade had fallen backward from his horse, and the riderless animal was still galloping forward. Throwbridge got a third rider before he was hit again.

Cass saw his body jerk. He fell backwards. He spotted Della crouching in the brush where Throwbridge had ordered her

when he'd heard the first shots down-creek, and grasped the fact that the main attack was taking place down there.

Della fired her Winchester once, and then Cass was driving in at the Big Three riders, shooting as he came. He heard Phelps yell behind him as he charged straight for the nearest man.

A bullet zipped through his shirt, touching the skin. He got his man with a slug through the middle. Della's Winchester cracked. A horse went down, spilling the rider.

"Stay down," Cass yelled at the girl as he went past her.

The big bay carried him on top of another Big Three rider just coming over a slight rise in the ground. Cass slashed at the man with the barrel of his gun, heard him scream with the pain as he fell from the saddle.

Then Phelps and Grayson, and the others were in the fight, and again it was the element of surprise which tipped the scale. Coming out of the timber, driving hard, they hit the Big Three men in the flank, upsetting them, chasing them through the timber.

Cass whirled the bay and came back to where Della was crouching over Throwbridge. Cass dropped beside them.

"He get it bad?" he asked.

Throwbridge, himself, answered the question. "Hell of a lot o' lead in me, but not the big one."

Cass found three bullet holes, one in the left shoulder, another through the right side, and a third through the right leg, above the knee.

Phelps came back, breathing hard, one side of his face red with blood. He looked down at the sheriff.

"Reckon I had you wrong, Ed. Come up to the creek here, Cass."

Cass followed him to the creek. The last of the woolies was disappearing, running away from the burning oil. Herders on foot were straggling after them. Two riders were looking across the creek from the rise over which the sheep had come. Even at the distance Cass recognized the bulk of Jarvis Cranston. With him was MacSween.

"They're too big to fight," Phelps growled. "They send out the other chaps an' they sit back an' wait till it's over."

Cass nodded. He hadn't expected Cranston to take an active part in this fight. Cranston was a big business man; he was ready to risk every penny he owned, but he was not fool enough to throw in his life with his money.

Cranston saw them standing on the other side of the Creek. The big man looked at them steadily for several long moments, and then he lifted a hand, held it aloft, and then let it drop. Wheeling his horse, he rode out of sight, MacSween following him.

Ad Phelps gulped, "You get that, Cass? He—he's through!"

Cass got it. It had been a peculiar gesture, a kind of tribute, and also an acknowledgement that he was through in the valley.

Della came up in time to hear Phelps' remark. She saw Cranston and MacSween disappearing over the rise. She looked at Cass.

"That means there'll be peace in the valley," she said.

"It'll be a nice place for a man to settle down," Cass said.

Ad Phelps looked at the both of them, rubbed his grizzled chin, and ambled off.

Della glanced after the old man, and then looked at Cass. She said, "We—we'd better go back to the sheriff."

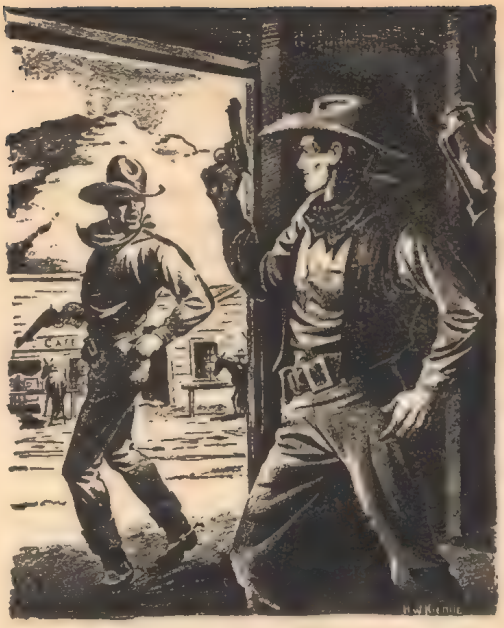
There was some color in her face as she turned away. Cass walked after her through the timber. She glanced back at him once, and she smiled. Cass Benton was thinking that there was to be more in Sentinel Valley than just peace.

A Fiction House Magazine

DRIFTER'S CHOICE

By W. T. BALLARD

From wide open Montana trails they summoned the Colt-smart saddle tramp . . . stuck him in a banker's chair, and told him to teach manners to land hogs in *six* easy lessons.



WADE PIERCE locked the bank doors, descended the two worn steps and turned along the sun-rotted wooden sidewalk of Front Street. To his restless eyes the broken boards represented the decay of the once flourishing town.

This walk had been trod by many feet; boots which sprouted large-roweled Mexican spurs, cracked, worn from months on the dry trails from the south; gamblers' shoes, and the slippers of dancing girls.

Bullhorn had boomed as a trail town, the end of steel, where bellowing longhorns of the Bend country had met the boxcars which would take them east to slaughter. But like Baxter Springs and Wichita it had faded, joining the necklace of shipping points outmoded as the rails pushed west.

Its moment of glory was short lived as the road built on. The shipping pens remained, but now only a few thousand head of local stock filtered each year through the loading chutes and it became another cow town, settling into the pattern of slow change which spread across the endless plains.

Only three saloons remained, sleepy in midweek inactivity, and what had been the biggest dance hall in the West now housed Horn's Emporium and Mercantile Establishment.

Pierce passed the store windows already lighted by their hanging lamps, and moved on to White's saloon, walking awkwardly in the unaccustomed low heeled shoes.

"Two hours," he thought. "I've been home two hours and I wish I'd never come." He paused before the swinging doors and looked bitterly at the dusty street.

A yellow dog, flea-bitten and nondescript, slunk from the livery barn to wallow in the deep powdered dirt. Old Mitchell closed the post office and walked with stiffened knees toward the yellow station, carrying a limp mail sack across his age-bent shoulders.

Nothing else moved but the flies pestering the two discouraged ponies at the battered hitching rack. And old Mrs. Calhoun who rocked ceaselessly on her swaybacked porch.

Wade Pierce turned away, shutting the scene out of his mind and entered the saloon. He felt uncomfortable in the neat black suit, the white shirt. The gun belt across his narrow hips seemed out of place, but without it he would have been entirely lost. Six years of badlands riding had made habit strong. There, survival had depended on watchfulness, and quickness of hand.

This same habit made him sweep the long empty room with careful eyes. Only one swinging lamp burned, casting its amber glow in softening tinge alike on the scarred bar, the row of bottles against the ex-

pensive mirror and the covered tables at the rear.

Ed White was behind his own bar, a spare man, his unbuttoned vest held together by a heavy watch chain.

SIX years ago Ed had had three bartenders working day and night. Then he had run the town from his office at the rear of the saloon, hiring fighting marshals, handing down orders with the ruthless impartiality of a just dictator.

He still ran the town, still was mayor, but now he had time to tend his bar and doze each morning in a tilted chair on the saloon's gallery.

He looked up, creasing the weekly paper into a long triangle with which he swatted at the buzzing flies. "How's it seem to be the head of a bank?"

Wade Pierce came against the bar, one foot raised, the heel of his shoe hooked upon the rail. He inspected his image in the mirror without pleasure.

"I look like a dressed up drummer. I should be peddling whiskey or calico." His wide, slightly humorous mouth split a face drawn thin and tight by hard riding. His eyes against the sun-darkened skin were startlingly blue. His hair beneath the hat line had bleached yellow brown. It was darker on top, but still carried a touch of tow-headedness.

"You don't cut a bad face," said Ed White. "I'll venture you had them Montana girls crazy at Saturday dances. Your uncle was a stepper in his younger days."

"And a banker when he grew up." Wade Pierce accepted the bottle placed before him. He poured his drink and put it down with a single motion of his head. "Why'd you send for me? I'm no banker. I never had five dollars from one pay to the next. Money in chunks scares me."

The man behind the bar shrugged. He used a cloth to mop up an imaginary spot, taking his time. "Someone had to carry on. You're the only Pierce left."

"Sure," said Wade bitterly. "And no credit to the name, to use my uncle's words. He called me a saddle tramp and he was right. There's something about forking a horse, climbing the next hill, just to see what she looks like on the far slope."

White moved his head slowly. "I know what you mean. I came up the Texas trail. But a man roots down and his ideas change. Someone has to run the bank."

"You run it," said Pierce. "I'll give it to you, free and clear. I want nothing but a horse to ride. Why should I be fenced into a money corral because I had an uncle who chose to start a bank?"

White leaned across the bar. "Don't think I'm crazy when I tell you that a fight is shaping up here. It's a bigger fight than most realize. It will take a young man, a strong man to lead."

Pierce's eyes narrowed. "Who want to fight for a broken town in the middle of a thousand miles of prairie? You're dreaming, Ed, dreaming of the old trail days."

"No," said White, and his voice trembled. "Things are happening, Wade, happening all over the West. This is a small bank, serving a single valley, but it's a mirror of other banks in other valleys.

"After the war the west was poor, starved, and no one offered us help. That was in the seventies and we had to drive our cows two thousand miles, but a change has come. Your uncle saw the change. It was he who understood, he who started to lead the fight."

Pierce did not understand but the strength of the old man's feeling shook him. "What's this about? The valley's all settled up, a section, maybe two apiece. What's there to fight about? What's there to fight for?"

White took time to answer, to arrange his words. "The land is settled up, yes, each man with his little part. That's why they came here, for land they could own, for a place to run their cows, to have feeder lots where they could fatten other stock. They buy and sell and they need cash to operate. It's these men who have made the land safe. But now, the grab is on. This is the eighties and the east has discovered us.

"The banking interests are moving in. All over the west the story is the same, vested capital, fighting the people for the land. In California they tell me the railroad is swallowing up the state. Here it's the banking crowd, using every weapon that they hold, grabbing individual banks, calling their loans, driving the people from the ownership of the land, making them into tenants as they were in the east."

"You're crazy," said Pierce. "I can

show you a million acres to the north, still unfenced, still free range."

"In the north, yes," excitement had heightened White's tone. "The land hogs haven't reached there yet. But in this state they hold the upper hand. So far no one's stood against them but your uncle. The other small banks watched his fight. They're still watching Bullhorn Valley. If we beat Sam Leavitt they'll close ranks. If we lose, they'll sell out from sheer hopelessness."

Pierce's attention quickened. "Sam Leavitt, not the land boomer we used to laugh at with his imigrants?"

"The same," said the old man, "but few laugh at Sam now. He heads this new state bank with offices in the capital. His operations already cover twenty counties, and he wants this bank. He knows that it has become a kind of rallying point for all who dare to fight him. He'll try to buy you out. If he fails, he'll turn to other means. He can't brook opposition."

The import still failed to reach Wade Pierce. He was a riding man, not a banker. He couldn't forsee that this was the beginning of the struggle for control of the west, a struggle between lone men and giant interests, a struggle which caused one of the great land booms of history, which did not end until the disastrous depression of ninety-three wiped out the inflated values.

But he sensed that White's words came from a deeper concern than any personal consideration.

"Don't decide now, Wade. Sleep on it. Don't make any decision until morning."

II

WADE PIERCE had a knowing eye for a pretty woman, but the girl in his uncle's office the next morning amazed him.

He lounged just inside the door considering her as she bent above the old fashioned roll-top desk, totally unconscious of his presence.

"Well," he said. "I'm not up on all the rules of banking, but I never heard that bank robbers were so pretty."

She spun with a surprised cry. Her fair hair was caught in a soft knot at the knape of her neck, but as she turned one lock escaped to fall across her eyes. She brushed it back impatiently. "You must be Wade Pierce."

"I must be," he came forward grinning.

"I'm Mary Colston." She said it as if she thought the name self-explanatory.

He bobbed his head. "Pleased to meet you, Mary Colston, but I still want to know, are you a bank robber?"

Her eyes widened and a spot of color came up into each rounded cheek. "That's not funny. You know I was your uncle's assistant."

"Well," said Pierce and his smile widened. "There's a lot of nice things about banking they forgot to tell me. No wonder my uncle liked it."

Her flush turned to one of anger and she said, sharply, "I'll be very glad to resign, now that you've come."

He advanced until he stood directly in front of her. She was tall for a woman, but he was much taller, towering above her.

"That would be a mistake, Mary. You know a lot more about this business than I do. You stay, I'll go back where I came from."

She was still angry. "Running away already?"

By instinct his big hands came up and gripped her shoulders. "No one ever accused me of running from anything, sweetheart."

His eyes darkened and the smile was gone from the wide mouth.

She shook herself free. "Don't ever touch me again. Don't call me that." Her anger was like a flame. He had seen other women in a rage, but he had never seen one so self possessed. "They called you wild, they said you had no stability."

"Who called me that?"

"The Evans of Montana. That's how Ed White found you. They said you would ride a hundred miles for a joke, but not one to keep a job."

His mouth twisted wryly. "I'm not used to people passing their judgments on my actions."

"A free soul," she was mocking him. "A forty-dollar horse and a fifty-dollar saddle. I know the kind. Your uncle used to talk about you. He deserved a better heir. He gave his life for this valley and now everything he worked for falls apart because there's no one to carry on.

Doesn't it matter to you that Sam Leavitt's gang will gobble up the state, that the men you knew, you grew up with, will be turned from their homes?"

"You sound like Ed White."

"Why not? Ed and I see the danger. Your uncle made us understand, but we are almost alone. Not all the members of the bank board agree. Some of the merchants, Horn for instance, are working with Leavitt. Without you, without your stock behind us they will win."

"I'll give it to you. I've already offered it to White."

Her anger increased. "Very funny, Mr. Pierce. Let Leavitt win here and his power will increase a thousand fold. But why should you care that all of us will bow to his machine or leave the state? The men who came here that they might own land and be beholden to no one . . . you'll sell them to Leavitt because you're too heedless, too selfish.

"You wear a gun and people say you can use it. But it takes another kind of courage in this fight and obviously you lack that kind."

Pierce said solemnly, "You don't need me. You're doing fine all by yourself. I'd as soon stand against you as a keg of dynamite, and if Sam Leavitt can whip you, he's a better man than I think."

The girl choked as if anger halted further words. She turned then, and swept past him and from the room, jarring the glass panel as she slammed the door.

Wade sat down at his uncle's desk. He was smiling to himself.

IT was nearly eleven when old Dustin, the combination bookkeeper and clerk, appeared to say that Sam Leavitt was there.

The state bank man was big, dressed like a prosperous rancher. Only the softness of his hands showed that he was no outdoor man.

He greeted Pierce as an old friend, his voice booming in the confines of the room. "Like old times to see you, Wade. Town's changed some in six years, not the wild place it was."

Pierce's mouth tightened. He had never cared for the ex-land agent, but he motioned his visitor to a chair and watched Leavitt sit down, finding irritation in the man's manner. There was an air of proprietorship as if Leavitt already felt himself the owner of this bank.

"Sad thing, your uncle's death," he boomed. "Always liked him, but death comes to us all."

Pierce's tone was short. "Let's not pretend grief, Sam. I hadn't seen him in six years and as you know, we did not get along."

The big man was surprised. He was a person who observed the outward polite niceties of life. But he recovered his poise as he mopped his red face with a handkerchief.

"Which brings me to business then. This town is dead, done for. She never lived up to the dreams we all had when steel first came in from the east. But I've got a bank in the capital. We're standardizing the finances of the state. The best way is one big bank, working for everyone."

Pierce did not trouble to mask his dislike. "A good deal for you, no doubt."

"And you," said Leavitt. "You're a range man, Wade. You're more comfortable on a horse than in a chair. You don't want to be troubled with the petty details of a bank."

He's using the same argument I gave Ed White and the girl, Wade thought. I should agree. I should be pleased he wants to buy me out.

But a natural stubborn streak rose up. Aloud he said, "I never meant to be a banker and it was a surprise to be mentioned in my uncle's will."

"Every man to his own last," Leavitt beamed. "I won't beat around the bush. This institution is capitalized for one hundred thousand, a third of the stock is yours. I offer thirty-five thousand for it now, although with conditions as they are, it's hardly worth face value."

"I don't know," said Pierce, for this was a game he understood, a game he'd played at many poker tables. "I hadn't thought of selling."

"Think of it now." Leavitt leaned forward eagerly. "Things are cheap, Wade. Thirty-five thousand will buy the best range in all Montana if you choose to return."

That was right. Pierce doubted if there was that much hard cash in all the northern ranges. And he knew the place, where Cabin Creek came rushing out of the hills. A brand of his own. The picture built up

in his mind. He found it pleasant to contemplate.

"You've got to think of yourself," said the big man. He tapped Pierce's knee. "I know Ed White called you home, but Ed's thinking in the past. He's standing against the best interests of the country."

The words jarred Pierce. White had always thought of the town first, and the Valley. Leavitt had taken the wrong track, said the wrong thing and Pierce was surprised by his own words. "I'm not selling, Sam. I guess I'm here to stay."

The genial mask slipped from Leavitt's face, leaving it hard and bleak, and his voice no longer boomed. "You're making a mistake, Wade. We'll crush you."

Pierce frowned at the threat. "I'm still not selling."

Leavitt rose, sensing the futility of argument. "You're ill-advised. You've been listening to Ed and the girl. They're using you for their own ends, they're making you into a fool."

Pierce came to his feet, his coat falling back and the big man saw the gun belt at the narrow hips. The words died on his thick lips and he retreated quickly to the door.

IT was the first board meeting Wade Pierce had ever attended, and he was glad to have Mary Colston there, although she still held her anger and offered him no greeting.

Leavitt appeared, but Leavitt was not alone. Pierce's eyes tightened as he recognized the lean sunburned man who followed the banker in.

Monk Moore belonged to an earlier day. A cowboy once, then a railroad detective, he had blazed his name across the west. Now he was Leavitt's field agent, cold and watchful.

Backed by Moore, Leavitt swaggered as he took his seat. Behind him came the others, Ed White, old and uncomfortable in his rusty business suit. Dutch Harmony, the solid, slow-moving rancher from Grass Creek, and Robert Horn who ran the big store.

This then was the board. Leavitt sat here because he had already bought up small holdings until he owned a fourth of the bank's stock.

But it was Horn who opened the meeting. Pierce had never liked the merchant. As a boy he had delighted in riding past the store's loading platform, roping and dragging any merchandise left outside.

He listened now as the store keeper spoke, his voice dry and emotionless.

"As long as Henry Pierce lived," Horn said, "I supported the interests in this bank who strove to keep outsiders from coming it. But Henry's dead, and none is trained to take his place." He turned and looked at Pierce, and old hate showed in his dark eyes. There was a relationship between these two that few man guessed, something buried for six years which colored judgment now.

He went on, and his voice had not changed. "I feel our whole position is unsound." He explained in detail then, the number of notes overdue, interest payments which had not been made.

Wade Pierce lost the thread of the words. He thought, Horn still hates me because of Judith. He's sold out because it is a way to strike at me. And he's the leader of the merchants as he always was. He'll carry them all into Leavitt's camp.

He turned a little in his creaking chair and put his full attention on Dutch Harmony.

The rancher's solid face had not changed expression. It was impossible to guess his thoughts.

Pierce knew that Harmony and his ranchers held the balance of the power. On one side lined up Leavitt and the Horn interests, on the other White, the girl and himself. It remained for the ranchers to decide. If Harmony voted against him, all was lost.

Horn knew this too. He appealed directly to the man. "The good of the whole Valley rests with this bank. We can't afford to shut ourselves off from the whole of the state, and that is exactly what we'll do if we refuse Leavitt's offer. Alone, we certainly can't beat this state group, therefore I say, in self protection, Bullhorn had best join them."

He sat down, his appeal finished, and Harmony had the floor. He spoke carefully, examining each word.

"Every ranch in the Valley is mortaged to this bank. No ranch has anything but cattle with which to pay. Personally I'd rather owe money in Bullhorn than in the

Capital. I'd rather deal with neighbors than eastern men." He settled back and Leavitt rose.

"You forget I'm a local man," he said. "You forget the interests of this valley are close to my heart. I can save you all if you give me the chance, but I warn you now that if you fail to join us, we'll have to fight you."

Mary Colston was on her feet. "You'll help us?" she demanded with dead earnestness. "You'll help us as you helped the people of Buffalo Creek. You bought their bank and called its loans. Who owns that valley now? I'll tell you who, a cattle company, financed in the east, run by hired hands for stockholders who live two thousand miles away. We don't want that in this valley. That isn't the reason men lived through their first year, buried deep in sod houses to escape the winter cold. If we sell them out, their voices will ring like thunder to shout us down. We will have lost our homes, our self respect. I'd beg or steal, or cheat to stop you, Sam Leavitt. I almost think I'd kill." Her eyes swept the circle of silent men. Then she was gone, running blindly out of the room.

Leavitt laughed, the booming sound bringing them out of their spell. "That's why women have no place in business," he said. "They get too emotional. Mary means the best in the world, but certainly we can't afford to trust our bank to the management of a woman and a saddle tramp who by all accounts has spent six years carrying a straight iron."

Wade Pierce stirred. A straight iron was used to change a brand. It was a studied insult to provoke a fight. He watched not Leavitt, but Monk Moore, knowing that the danger lay in this quiet man.

It was obvious now that Levitt knew the fight here was lost, that he was turning to other things. It was a signal that Pierce could not ignore for death might well be the result.

But he pretended not to hear. If it was a fight they wanted, he would give them one. But not in this crowded room. He sat silent and listened as they voted Leavitt down, knowing that although the first round was won, the battle had hardly been engaged. That would come later.

III

LIGHT from the hotel lobby laid a yellow pattern across the gallery and out into the street. Three drummers filled the cane bottomed chairs and told their stories, their ready laughter riding out across the dark.

Wade heard their laughter as he left the bank. It gave him a sense of loneliness which he did not understand. He was used to long trails, to no company save his own thoughts.

But here, in the center of a town, he felt alone, felt that he did not belong. He had spent the evening on the books, verifying what Horn had said about the condition of the bank.

Even to his untutored eyes the situation seemed dangerous. Too much of the capital and deposits was tied up in loans on which not even the interest had been paid. He did not need anyone to tell him what would happen if all the depositors suddenly decided to withdraw their funds. There was less than ten thousand dollars in cash on hand.

Wearily he turned toward his hotel room.

He passed the Horn store and was surprised to hear a woman call his name from the dark entrance. He halted. Judith Horn came slowly out of the shadow to face him.

Seeing her was a shock. She stood against the background of light from Ed White's place and one searching moment told him she was more beautiful than he remembered.

This was the girl he had loved, the girl who had sent him riding northward on the long trail. She had the dark beauty of her Spanish mother, the full rich warmth of the southern races.

He had squired her to her first dance, against her father's pleasure, had watched her grow, had watched her flirt with other men and had stood by while she married Will Jarmane. He knew, standing there that he would not have returned had he known she was still in town.

Her tone was as soft and caressing as the darkness. "You've been avoiding me, Wade."

"I didn't guess you were here. I supposed your husband had taken you east."

"Will's dead," she told him simply. "He

died the spring after you left. You could have found out, had you cared."

He did not explain that he had purposely sought no news of Bullhorn, that he had tried to forget the town. He stood there and the silence became strained until she said.

"I want to talk to you if you have a little time."

He nodded. "I've nothing else to do."

She seemed not to notice his cool reply and led him up the steps at the side of the store building to the rooms where Horn lived.

Wade paused in the doorway and looked around. Horn had prospered, but the rooms had not changed with the years. They were still ugly and uncomfortable. It was a place to flop in rather than a home and he could not wonder that Judith had fled to Jarmane's arms for warmth and love.

Will Jarmane had had taste and knowledge and understanding, for all he was a gambling man. He had been polished in a way that Pierce would never be. It was hardly a contest between them, it had not been a contest from the first time the gambler had smiled at the dark haired girl.

Wade turned to look at her now. Against his hardened resolve he had to admit that the last few years had added to the fullness of her charm. And she was smiling, the same provocative smile he remembered.

And the dark eyes seemed to beg. "Like me a little, Wade, just a little for old times sake."

He spoke, finding his voice not steady. "I'm glad to see you, Judith. This is like old times. I begin to feel that maybe I've come home."

"Maybe you have, Wade." She motioned him toward a chair. "I was hurt at first, after Will's death, when you did not come, then I was hurt last night, when I heard you were in town, yet you made no effort to see me. It did not seem possible that you did not know I was here."

"I had no way of knowing."

"No," she told him. "I guess you had no way of knowing, but although your apparent neglect hurt me, I pocketed my pride to talk to you tonight. I couldn't let you go unwarned."

He looked at her sharply. "Warned?"

"About the bank," she said.

"What about the bank?"

"The bank is gone," her voice was low. "I overheard my father talking, and he's not one who makes mistakes where business is concerned."

Wade started to tell her that her father had sold out, but he held his words.

"Think of your position," she said. "When the bank fails all the people will blame you for their lost savings. Why should you take that blame? For it will fail. You must stop listening to White and that Colston girl. They'll ruin you. Sell while you can before they strike you. Take your money, buy your Montana ranch, leave Bullhorn to its own troubles."

She leaned forward as she talked. Her eyes were warm and intimate, holding out an unspoken promise and he thought, She's right of course. This isn't my fight. I can have my ranch, and unless I misread the signs, take her north with me.

And then he thought of Sam Leavitt. His face hardened. "No, Judith."

The warmth died from her face, leaving it strained. "You've listened to Mary Colston and her speeches. She's sold you on something, perhaps on herself. You're different, Wade, you're not the boy I knew. You're stupid and stubborn and bull-headed. Go your way. Get yourself killed, but when the time comes only remember that I tried to warn you and that it was not me, but Mary Colston who got you into this."

He stared at her, not understanding. He started to tell her that she was wrong, that he had not been thinking of the Colston girl at all. And then he closed his lips and rose. What was the use of further argument?

THE hotel room was hot and close. He opened the single window and stood smoking, looking off across the roofs of the darkened town. His window faced the back, and he could not see Front Street from where he stood.

Beneath the window ran the slanting roof of the rear gallery, beyond it a trampled yard and ancient barn. His eyes were on the clustered roofs, but his mind considered other things.

Mary Colston had made her speech at the bank. He hadn't seen her since, but the angry way she had faced Leavitt made pleasant remembrance.

Certainly she had hoped for nothing by her stand. It was an honest gesture brought forth by impulsive rage. A firebrand in a simple dress. But Judith's motives were not entirely clear.

What had she hoped for? What had she wished to gain? Certainly she must have known that any time during the past years a word from her would have brought him back down the trail. But she had never sent that word, and yet tonight she had sought him out.

He could not understand women's minds. He ground out his cigarette upon the sill and turned to bed.

He slept, as he always slept, with ears alert. He heard the drummers mount the stairs and make the noisy passage to their rooms. The house settled. A lone horse went out of town at a half run. A dog yelped from the direction of the livery corral, and far off a swelling chorus of coyotes answered him.

Suddenly Pierce was wide awake. He lay still, listening. The room and hall beyond was blanketed in darkness. Only the pale rectangle of the window enabled him to orient himself.

The noise came again, men's voices from outside.

He rose, his feet soundless on the old boards, and reached the window. A rind of moon showed above the warped stable and shone faintly on half a dozen men.

He watched them, studying each carefully. He recognized the leader. Monk Moore waited beside his horse, giving low-voiced orders to the crowd.

This was Leavitt's answer, thought Wade. Violence was to take the place of argument. This was what Judith Horn had tried to tell him.

He turned swiftly in the darkness and found his pants and boots. The gunbelt sagging across his hips restored his confidence.

He lifted the heavy weapon and held it lightly in his hand, then moved close to the open doorway as he heard the shuffling on the stairs.

They came along the hall, two men, feeling their way. Pierce's lips curved grimly in the darkness, then he heard the muttered, "Hell, the door's open. Something's wrong."

The whispered answer was sharp and distinct. "What's wrong?" It's hot. He left it open for air. Go on."

THEY moved into the room. Wade could smell the sweat of their riding clothes, the hotness of their bodies. He struck as the second man's outline moved between him and the window light, feeling the jar as the heavy barrel buffaloed the head.

The one in advance turned, bringing up his gun, but he was too late. Pierce's arm chopped down a second time, the metal crashing dully against bone.

The relief of action flowed through him as a tonic. He laughed quietly to himself and stepped across the twisted bodies to the window. His impulse was to step out on the gallery roof, to leap lightly to the ground and face Monk Moore down, bringing this whole struggle to a head.

But common sense told him that was not the way. Leavitt was not here and Sam would carry on no matter what happened to Moore and the men in the yard below.

He had to slip from the hotel. The thought of running was contrary to all his impulses, but he wasted no time. He ran downstairs, stepped quickly from the doorway toward the livery.

The challenge from behind him cut the still night. "That you, Joe?"

The gun in Wade's hand sent a bellowing explosion in the gloom. A man's cry blended upward with the echoes of the shot, and behind the hotel shouts rose.

Pierce splintered the hotel's corner with a second bullet, turned and ran. No hope to reach the livery now. No hope of gaining his horse. He cut across Front Street and sprinted between two buildings, vaulting a low fence.

Memory came back to guide him. As a boy he had played among these same buildings. He knew every alley, every twist and path.

Once this had been the district housing cheap saloons and dance halls. Beyond was the railroad with its loading pens, the switching yard, guarded by the water tower. Now the buildings housed Mexicans and poor whites, or stood empty and gaping.

He moved again, more slowly now, keeping close to the building line until he reached the railroad.

Behind him the town came to life. Half a hundred houses showed lights. Men moved grimly, hunting him like an animal.

He knew they had fanned out, making a line along Front Street so that he could not double back to the residential side.

There was little time to think and none to waste.

He heard the low whistle of the freight, its puffing engine struggling with the long drag as it fought the slight grade from the west.

He jumped across the tracks, and dropped belly-flat in the sheltering weeds. The engine came on, its flickering light washing across the station and the yards. He caught the irons of the fourth car and swinging up, climbed to the top.

From this vantage point he watched the lights of the town fade. Then he put it from his mind and considered what to do. It was three hours to the capital but there were other stations in between, other towns in which he might sleep safe.

IV

THE NOON train, crowded with westward immigrants, pulled into Bullhorn twenty-five minutes late. The engine man called his greeting to the station master and swung down with his long snouted oil can.

Wade Pierce stepped from the last car. He had dropped off the freight at Buffalo Creek and spent the night on a hard station bench.

He left the train on the side away from the platform. He rounded the train and walked across one corner of the wooden platform.

The usual crowd of town people was missing, but the few who loitered in the shade of the overhang put their full attention upon him.

He gave them a searching look, found no danger here and stepped across the switch track to enter Railroad Avenue. Ahead of him was the town's main intersection with the bank standing to the right. He saw the crowd about the entrance, a swelling half circle which spread across the sidewalk and into the street.

Then he went on, lengthening his steps and came against the fringes of the crowd.

Men turned under his hands, their faces changing and showing bewilderment. Someone called, "He's here. He's come back," and the crowd split so that he made the passage to the door. Inside the pack pushed toward the single wicket behind which old Dustin paid out money.

Several reached to catch his arm, shouting their demands or waving their open pass books beneath his nose.

He used his shoulders to push them aside and somehow gained the office door and slid through. Then he put the bolt in place and turned around.

White and the girl had swung to face him.

"We thought you'd gone," said White. His voice was tired, his shoulders sagged.

Wade looked at the girl. "Did you think so too? Did you think I'd run away?"

She sat down, weary from the tension. "I didn't know what to think. I don't know that you'd be blamed for running out. There isn't anything left that we can do. If you'd been here this morning when it first started we might have checked it. But Leavitt's men have spread across the town. They've whispered that the bank's not safe, that you took funds last night and disappeared."

"But I'm here now. Those fools saw me come in."

She shook her head and it hurt him to watch her giving up.

He said, grimly, "I don't know much about these things, but I can't see where we're whipped yet. True, we haven't the cash on hand to pay all the depositors, but we have assets, notes on loans. Can't we explain that to the people? Can't we show them the books?"

White shook his head. "Those people out there aren't thinking quickly. They're scared. They only know they want their money, and they're afraid that it is gone. When we've paid out the last cash, we close the doors and then the banking commissioner steps in. He'll appoint a receiver, and Leavitt controls the commission. They'll call the loans, and force the mortgage payments. Those who can't pay will be closed out."

"Explain that to the depositors."

"No use," said White. "They'd howl me down. Did you ever try and argue with a scared man? He's more dangerous than all the heroes ever born. You'll be

held responsible for this, and none of it is your fault. They'll probably try and lynch you after the doors close."

"Mary," said Pierce, and forced her to look up at him. "You know more about this business than I do. Start thinking. There must be something we can do. Can't we raise money from other banks on our loans?"

She shook her head. "Our correspondent is Leavitt's State Bank. It's run by Ralph Forbes in the capital. Naturally we can't expect help from him. As for the others, the small banks like ourselves, they know that as soon as we're whipped Leavitt will turn on them. They don't dare to move for fear of increasing his wrath."

"But if we whipped him."

"Whip him first, then you'll have all the help you need. It's always that way, Wade. People will follow a leader, after he's winning."

He stared at her helplessly. She rose and laid a hand on his arm. "Ed's right. We got you into this. It was a hopeless fight already. You've got to get out of town. I'm sorry about the things I said yesterday. I didn't mean them, and I don't want you hurt. It's the last thing I want—for you to be hurt."

He took both her hands. "Listen to me, Mary. We're not through yet. There was ten thousand cash this morning. It takes time to pay that out in small amounts. Tell Dustin to take all the time he can. Tell him to keep paying until closing, then shut the doors. Time's on our side. Somehow, somewhere, I'll find help by morning."

He saw by her face that she did not believe him. He saw that Ed White did not believe him. They both thought he was running away. Well, let them. He went out through the rear door.

He had no clear plan, nothing except he meant to find Leavitt and force the big man to save the bank.

He moved along the alley and passed behind Horn's store, and from the rear door Judith again called his name. His first impulse was to ignore her, but after an instant's hesitation he turned and crossed the loading platform and stepped inside.

"Wade," she said, and caught his arm as he stepped in. "What happened to you? How'd you escape?"

"I rode out on the train."

"The orders were that you would be captured, but only held out of town until the bank was closed. You're caught in this bank failure and you will be blamed."

"Will that matter to you?" he asked, and realized that the words were merely automatic, that he no longed cared.

She was as desirable as ever, but somehow, somewhere he had changed. For six years he had nursed memory, seeing her image in every camp fire that he built, but now that she stood before him the memory became unreal, a dream that failed in its fullfillment even when she told him,

"You know it matters, Wade. It always did, although I had to marry someone else to find it out. When Will died I thought it was too late. But you're back now and I am here to save you. I can get the money that you need to pay the depositors."

"You can!"

She nodded quickly, eagerly. "Yes, you can pay them off and then make your deal with Sam. I know how such things are done. I'll draw a check against your bank. With my father's credit behind you there will be no difficulty. Any one will cash it in Kansas City or St. Louis. It will take three days for the check to clear the clearing house. By that time you will have stopped the run, and once people learn that they can get their money they will start redepositing. You'll have the money to pay my check when it comes from the clearing house. It's a way of getting credit without asking it."

He looked at her. "That doesn't sound too honest."

She laughed at him. "You never change, do you, Wade? There is a difference between sharp practice and dishonesty. I'll help you, Wade, but first you must make a deal with me. When the bank is saved, you'll sell out to my father and to Sam. We'll take the money and leave Bullhorn."

He frowned. "But that's what I could have done yesterday had I been willing to sell out the valley to Leavitt's crowd. The small ranchers still look to me for help."

She flashed at him. "You ask too much. I offer you a chance to save your neck and you talk about the valley. Is it the valley

that holds your interest, or that Colston girl?"

He looked at her and laughed. It was the first real laugh he'd had that day. "You're smart," he said. "I guess you always were too smart for me, Judith. I see that now. You read my mind when I can't read it myself."

She flushed and her eyes were angry dark. "You're a fool," she told him savagely. "All bets are off. See if it helps the valley and the girl when those angry depositors hang you to the water tower." She turned and moved away. He watched her for a minute, then he left the store.

THE station lay deserted in the afternoon heat. The whole town's interest still centered at the bank.

The telegraph operator sat before his clattering relay, penciling invoices of freight. He did not turn until Pierce shoved the message beneath the grill and called.

The operator was not a local man. He read the message aloud without interest.

Ralph Forbes
State Banking Company
Please extend every courtesy to Wade Pierce. He is now one of us.
Leavitt

He made the count and gave Pierce his change, then turned to the key and started sending.

Up at the head of Railroad Avenue Wade could still see the crowd about the bank. Even as he heard the whistle of the train he saw White appear, herding the crowd before him, and lock the building's doors. For an instant Wade Pierce knew the bitter hopelessness of defeat, then glanced at his watch and saw it was after three. Another banking day had passed and he had until morning to raise some funds.

He was the first one on the train when it came in, and his impatience grew as it failed to move. If someone from the crowd had spotted him, they might prevent his leaving town.

But no one came and the train rolled at last.

The capital had changed. He remembered it as a raw country town. There was a state house now, a new station, and six blocks of business houses and stores.

He went first to the Western Hotel, washed and cleaned himself. Then he sought Forbes. It was long after hours and he found the banker at his residence.

Forbes shook hands, insisting that he join them for dinner. "I got Sam's wire," he said. "I'm glad to see that you've joined us, that the possibility of trouble is past. We tried to convince your uncle, but he could not see that his best interests lay with us."

Pierce nodded. This was like a game. Pierce told him, "I hate to ask this knowing it is after hours. But I'm heading north now that you're taking over my interests. I have a little deal in cattle to close first, and the seller, being an old timer, insists on gold."

The whole thing was so easy that it scared him. Forbes went to get his hat, and together they moved down to the bank. Requests for cash in cattle purchases were still a standard procedure here.

He gave a check drawn on the Bullhorn bank. It amused him as he wrote his sprawling signature.

He watched the banker count out the gold. He thanked the man. "We're all together in this," Forbes said. "We'll all make our fortunes in this state. A solid man, Sam Leavitt, and one it pays to tie to."

"So I've found," said Pierce. "Tell Sam how I appreciate his help." They separated on the walk before the bank and Wade turned quickly to the station, the fifty odd pounds in the bag bumping against his leg. His right hand was free, close to the belted gun. The game was almost in his hands but he found that it would be a good two hours before the train would come.

The sun was dropping from sight when he reached his hotel room.

He drew a chair forward and sat down, watching the empty street below. The gong sounded from the dining room, but he did not stir although he had not eaten since morning. There was a rising tide of excitement within him, a nervousness entirely foreign to his nature.

He thought, I'm jumpy as a cat. I wasn't cut out to be a thief. I'll get this money back to Bullhorn and light out.

Ed can see the check is paid when things quiet down."

He glanced at his watch and was surprised to see that barely five minutes had passed. He built a cigarette and smoked slowly, feeling the bag with the toe of his shoe.

This is silly, he thought. There's no reason for Forbes to guess that anything is wrong.

Then he stiffened. Forbes was hurrying across the street. He was not alone. The bulky man at his side almost ran to keep up. Light flicked on the badge pinned to his shirt.

Pierce picked up the gold and ran into the hall. There was a stairway at the rear. He used this to gain the area behind the long frame building.

Darkness was heavy here and he crossed quickly to the dust cushioned alley, and along it to the side street. The hunt was on.

He must catch the evening train. But the station was the first place they would watch. It would be the focal point of the hunt.

He moved along the street away from the business district. He reached the dead end and stepped over the wire fence, crossing the field beyond, thanking the luck which made the moon obscure.

It seemed he covered miles, skirting the town's edge until he reached the single line of rails. Out of the night loomed the water tower. He plodded toward the tank, seeing the station lights well beyond.

The bag jarred heavily against his leg, its contents giving small clicking sounds as he walked. He came to a stop between the tower and the station. Here he settled down until his shoulders were hidden by the growth.

THE train was due. He saw travelers gathered in small knots on the distant platform. Among them moved several men. These he guessed were looking for him and he smiled grimly through the screen of weeds.

The whistle of the train. He watched far down the track where the headlamp would appear and saw it approach, like a cyclops giant peering at the night.

It paused a good five minutes at the platform. Then it moved on up to the tank and he heard the gush of water released through the hose.

Not until the drivers spun did he move. Like a shadow he came out of the weeds to grasp the iron at the front of the baggage coach. The increasing speed of the train swung him up, his feet finding the lowest step, then he climbed, crawling out onto the car's convex top and lying there, bellyflat against the wind.

Hot cinders poured from the unscreened stack. They burned his cheeks and neck. He clung there, swearing, for an hour, twice forced to beat out sparks which tried to burn his clothes.

To hell with this, he thought, and scrambled crab-like along the car until he reached the other end. Here he lowered himself on the ladder to the open platform of the first coach and took a minute examining the occupants through the glass door.

Most of the passengers slept. The first seat was empty and he thrust the door inward as quietly as possible and stepped from the swaying platform, and seated himself.

No one seemed to pay him any attention. He put the bag between his feet and settled, pulling down his hat brim to shadow his face. He sat motionless, staring through the small square window which showed the end of the lurching baggage coach. The train rattled and jerked over its uneven road bed. A slightly flat wheel hammered. The air was close and hot and gradually his senses dulled, relaxed by the absence of any danger.

Fresh sound brought him fully awake. He turned to see that the door at the back of the car had been pushed inward and two men were entering. A sharp glance showed that he had seen neither before, but he trusted only one quick look, then faced the front and watched their progress in the small square window.

Its coated dirt increased the mirror effect and he saw clearly how they paused to examine each passenger.

He shifted a little to free his gun. Then he sat quiet, waiting.

As they reached the side of Pierce's seat, he turned his face, and brought the gun into sight.

Both men were motionless, hampered by the confines of the aisle. "Don't move. Face the other side."

He lifted their guns.

"Now open the door."

His voice had been so low pitched, their movements so unhurried, that not one of the sleepers had waked. "On the platform," he said, and leaving their guns in the seat, followed them to the door.

They clung to the hand rails, blocked in further progress by the blind end of the baggage coach. The train was laboring up a grade.

"Jump," said Pierce.

"Hey," the man was tall and thin, his cheeks drawn in as if from lack of food. "We'll kill ourselves."

"Not in those weeds," Pierce was inflexible. "Roll when you land, but jump."

"The devil with you."

"Jump or I'll shoot you off."

The thin faced man looked at him, then at the gun. He went slowly down the steps, stood for an instant, looking back, then turning yanked his hat tight on his head and disappeared into the night.

The second man licked dry lips. His eyes sought Pierce's face as if searching for some sign of relenting. He found none. With a shrug he went down the three steps and leaped.

Pierce turned back to glance along the car. One or two sleepers stirred, muttering against their cramped positions, but none had awakened.

He picked up the two guns, stepped back across the high sill and threw them from the train. That done he closed the door and returned to his seat. It was still a long ride to Bullhorn, but he thought that now it should be undisturbed.

V

THE FIRST houses of Bullhorn raced past the window as the engine fought to slow the pushing cars.

Pierce lifted the bag and stepped outside, letting the sudden rush of fresh air clear his head of the stale fumes from the coach.

Then he went down the steps on the far side and peered ahead, leaning out as far as could to see the platform and the track ahead, bathed in the engine's light.

He had a fleeting, sweeping look at the platform, expecting it to be filled with Leavitt's men. It wasn't, and their absence puzzled him. He dropped off into the weeds before the train stopped and waited there, watching.

The stop was short, not over a couple of minutes. Above the line of his head the moving row of lighted windows blended as the train picked up momentum. Then it was gone, and he stood alone beyond the reach of the station lights, facing the platform across the right of way.

The station master turned his eyes from the fading lamps of the now speeding train. He set his signal arm for the eastbound freight, then moved inside the building and closed the door.

He crossed the tracks, stepping up onto the planks of the walk.

Still nothing happened. His lack of understanding increased as he rounded the corner and started up Railroad Avenue.

From the shadow of the feed store gallery a man stepped into view.

Thirty feet separated them, and the light was on the hazy side, but Pierce knew as certainly as if it had been high noon that he faced Monk Moore.

He stopped, motionless as a statue in a park, then called, "Where's your men, Monk?"

"No men," said Moore. "I never thought you'd get this far. And I need no help. Give me the gold."

"Come after it," Pierce said.

He saw Moore move, watchful as a coiling snake. Moore had moved half a dozen steps. But Pierce made no move. He stood as if rooted to the spot, the bag still hanging heavily from his left hand. "Give me the gold."

Pierce let mockery ride his tone. "I've got it Monk. You take it away from me."

"I'll take it." Moore made his move. It was hard to see his hand, but he had crouched a little, and his was the first shot. Pierce was certain of that. He heard the man's bullet pass even as he swung up the heavy barrel and fired.

It seemed he too had missed. He fired again and again.

He saw Moore crumple. Wade felt a sting in his leg. He took a step and found he still could walk.

Monk Moore was dead. Pierce looked down at him without regret. He had no

elation, no rancor. The man had played his game and lost. It was the way things were. He could not have walked on to the bank if Moore had lived. But he walked now, holstering his gun, conscious of the pain he hadn't felt before.

The shots had brought life to the town. He feared that they might bring Leavitt's men before he reached the bank. He hurried, hobbling along, wondering if he would have to crawl the last hundred yards. He wasn't conscious of the blood he'd lost.

ED WHITE found him on the floor before the old safe. Ed had a scatter-gun in the crook of his arm. He took one look at the white face, the blood soaked leg, then he was slicing the cloth away and fixing a tourniquet. He worked rapidly, his fingers sure. Then he spun to the bank door and sent a runner for the doctor.

The whole street was alive with people now, and Sam Leavitt came pushing through, the sheriff at his heels. Pierce was conscious of Leavitt's presence and managed a smile. The big man's face was a blotted red, uneven and spotty with almost a bluish tinge.

"Arrest him," Leavitt told the sheriff. "He stole twenty thousand dollars from the bank in the capital. Where is it, Pierce?"

Pierce smiled. "You've got me, Leavitt," his voice was a little weak. "But the money is in that safe, and it belongs to this bank."

Leavitt was threatened with a stroke. It was all he could do to enunciate his words. "You can't get away with this. The courts . . ."

"I have gotten away with it," said Pierce. "No one, not even the sheriff, can touch the money in this safe. And I didn't rob your bank, Sam. I cashed a check."

"A worthless check."

"How do you know? Has it been presented here for payment yet? Has that payment been refused? Wait until it is, then you will know whether you have a case or not." He passed out then. The doctor looked and snorted once.

"A clean hole," he said. "The bullet passed clear through. There's nothing wrong a good rest and a lot of food won't cure. He's lost a lot of blood, and how he ever walked in here without help, I'll never know."

They carried Pierce to the hotel and put him to bed. Leavitt swore out a double warrant, for bank robbery and murder, but Pierce did not know. It was well into the afternoon before his mind was clear and the first person he saw beside the bed was White, sitting quiet, watchful as a mother hen.

"How goes it?" he said and couldn't understand why he was so very weak.

White grunted. "Lie still and don't use up your strength. And don't let that deputy sitting in the hall worry you. As soon as Judge Cramer gets back, we'll have those fool warrants dismissed. No jury in this town would hold you for killing Moore, not when the gun was still in his hand, with four shots gone and one of them in your leg. A thing like that needs no witnesses, not when Moore's reputation is well known."

"The bank," said Pierce, "what about it?"

"Forget the bank," said White. "Don't keep asking questions. You've lost a lot of blood. The bank's all right. I took the gold from the safe and had it heaped in sight on the counter when we opened this morning. It was remarkable how few wanted to withdraw their accounts when they saw that stack of double eagles shining at them. Confidence is a funny thing. You have it or you don't. It's not a matter of talk or reason, just a feeling each man must get himself."

Pierce relaxed and closed his eyes and White went on. "The story's all over town, how you whipped Leavitt at his own game. You're pretty close to a hero now, and only yesterday they would have gladly hung you to the nearest pole. But the telegraph operator talked. He told how you wired Forbes in Leavitt's name, and then how Judith came and questioned him, and after her questions, the string of wires Leavitt sent."

Pierce open his eyes. "So that's how they found out what I had done. It was Judith who gave me the idea in the first place."

Ed White's old eyes were shrewd. "Three times today she's come here to see you, but I wouldn't let her in. Judith's a woman, Wade, a pretty one, and dangerous."

Pierce smiled. "Stop worrying, Ed. She won't get around me again."

"I'm not so sure." White shook his old head. "A man like Leavitt is slippery, but you can back him down and then he'll quit. A woman like Judith never quits until she has her way, and sometimes not even then."

"Stop talking about Judith," Pierce said, "And tell me about Mary. Hasn't she been here. Hasn't she even asked how I was?"

"She hasn't had time," said White. "She's been the busiest person in this state."

Pierce's mouth was no longer humorous. "I suppose I could expect nothing more. Her first, her only thought is for the bank. In a time like this she'd have no chance to worry about anything else."

White's mouth twitched at one corner, but his eyes were as solemn as an owl's. "That's right. She worries about banking constantly. Why, ever since last night when you were hurt, she's been doing nothing else but sending telegrams. I think she's wired every independent bank in the state. She's told each the full story of what you did, and told them that she needs to raise twenty thousand to meet the bad check you drew.

"You'd be surprised how persuasive that girl can be. On every train, by every stage, the money has been pouring in. There's so much in our safe right now, I'm getting scared, I've hired an extra guard. We can meet your check now, a good ten times. I didn't know there was as much gold in the state."

—Pierce tried to sit up, but White pushed him down. "Lie still, you fool. The whole country is celebrating. You don't want that celebration to end in your funeral, do you?"

"But where is she?"

"Why, in the hall. She's been there waiting this last half hour for you to come awake. But the doc said that you weren't to have excitement, and personally I'd say that Mary was exciting."

"Send her in, you old fool." Pierce closed his eyes and when he opened them, she was standing beside the bed, looking down at him.

"How are you, Wade?"

"I'm fine," he said. "I'm all but well. I've got to get out of here."

"You'll lie still," she told him, "until the doctor says you can get up. Don't be a dunce."

His mouth quirked. "It seems I was a dunce. It seems I caused a lot of trouble and killed a man, all to no purpose."

Her grey eyes clouded as she failed to understand. "All to no purpose, you say?"

"Why yes. White's been telling me. He says you wired the small banks, and they've been sending money to help us out. Why didn't you do that yesterday? It would have been much simpler than all the hocus-pocus I went through."

"You don't understand," she told him, and sat down on the edge of the bed, taking his hand in both of hers. "I couldn't have made the appeal yesterday, and if I had, it wouldn't have done any good."

"You mean you did it to meet my check, to keep me from going to prison for theft?"

She smiled a little. "Listen, Wade, there's nothing in this world I wouldn't do to help you in any way I could. But you've got to understand. Yesterday each small bank was scared of Leavitt. They were holding all their reserves, too frightened to offer help to us or anyone.

"Then you pulled your play. You beat Leavitt at his own game, and confidence and hope came alive. Yesterday I could merely wire an appeal. Today I offered all a chance to live, a chance to carry on. A chance to fight under your leadership."

"Not mine," he said, and grinned. "The idea was Judith Horn's. I'll admit that she did not plan the outcome quite as it worked, but without her, I'd have never thought of it."

She said, fiercely, "Listen to me, Wade Pierce. I've talked with Judith today. She had the nerve to come and see me at the bank. She told me how you'd loved her all your life. She warned me off because she considered you belonged to her.

"The way it's told in stories people are supposed to play fair. You don't tear down your rivals, you sit by and let them practice all their underhanded tricks. Well if those are the rules I have no use for rules. I won't sit by and see her worm her way in here. I told White to keep her out. You're too good for her, Wade. I won't let her have a chance at you again."

He grinned and gripped her hand.

"Tell me, am I too good for you?"

She said, "You're pretty certain of yourself, aren't you?"

His smiled widened. "Your words are enough to turn any rider's head. You've been flattering me ever since I came. But if I can't have Judith, don't I get you?"

She tried to pull away. "You're laughing at me now."

Somewhere he found the strength to hold her tight, and he was laughing. "Answer me."

"A girl's supposed to keep a man guessing. That's one of the rules."

"Make up your mind, you said you didn't play by rules."

"Stop laughing at me," she was getting angry. "You've got to be serious."

"Why? Leavitt's beaten."

"We've got to consolidate our gains, to keep the small banks linked for mutual protection, for the protection of everyone."

"Sweetheart, you make a pretty speech. I never thought I'd have a wife who talked like a Fourth of July orator."

"There, you're laughing at me again."

He was suddenly stern. "Look, honey, and this is as important as any fight. You take things too seriously. Relax a little. Learn to smile. Laugh at yourself and at what happens. Sometimes that's the only saving grace. I'm not as smart as you perhaps, but I know that laughter has its place, and there are other things."

She gave him a small smile. "I guess you're right."

"Certainly I'm right. Now kiss me so that I can see whether your kisses are as sweet as Judith's. That's important too."

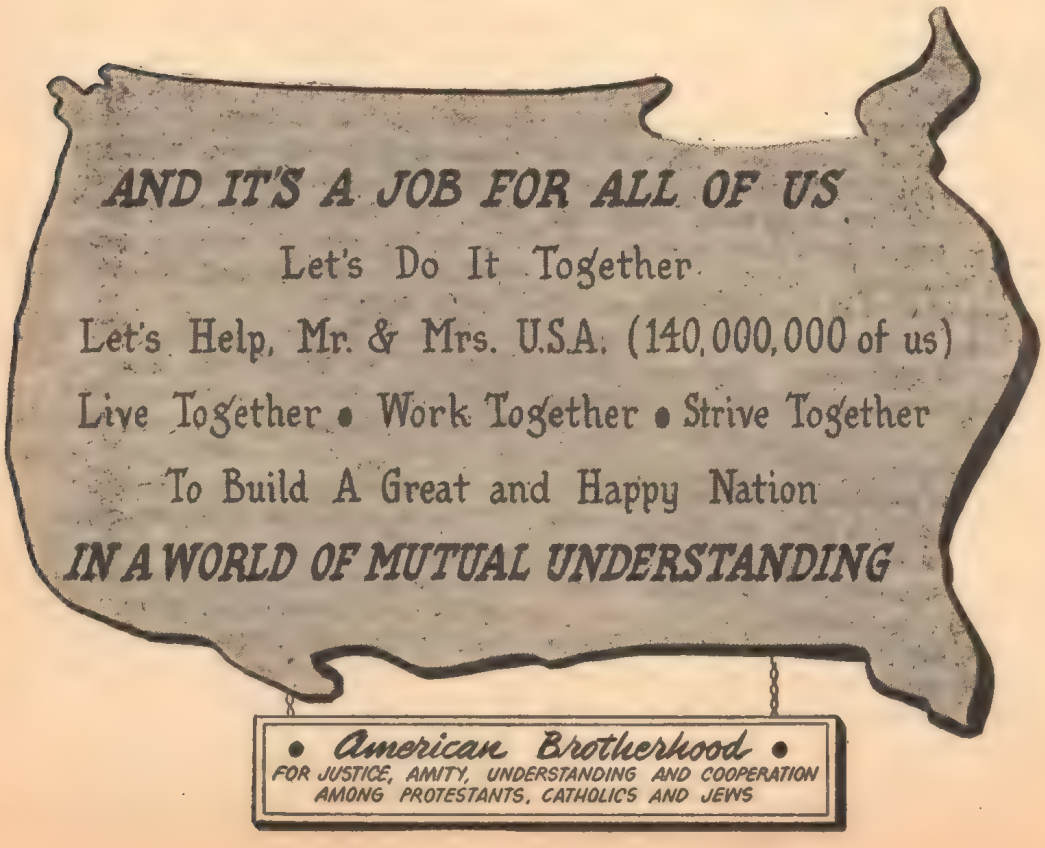
"You're mocking me again."

"No, just laughing with you. Some men have to kid about serious things."

She kissed him. "How was that?"

"I think maybe you'll learn," he said. "Try it again. I guess we'll have to stay and run the bank. If we went to a ranch there'd be no one but the cattle to listen to your speeches."

"And maybe a good thing," she said, and this time it was she who laughed. Ed White looked in. He thought there must be something the matter. There wasn't. Everything he saw, was fine.


AND IT'S A JOB FOR ALL OF US
Let's Do It Together
Let's Help, Mr. & Mrs. U.S.A. (140,000,000 of us)
Live Together • Work Together • Strive Together
To Build A Great and Happy Nation
IN A WORLD OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING
• American Brotherhood •
FOR JUSTICE, AMITY, UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATION
AMONG PROTESTANTS, CATHOLICS AND JEWS

THE ACE OF DEATH

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

Two women, one middle-aged, tired and bitter; the other young, daring and beautiful, were set to play for the highest stakes the *Lost Lode* tables had ever seen.

TOO MUCH depended upon the turn of this single card for Tom Hale to take his narrowed gray eyes off the dealer's quick fingers. Yet Hale couldn't miss the flicking of Claiborne's own colorless orbs toward Ross Archer, owner of the *Lost Lode.*

Watching Claiborne's thin, white hands, Hale couldn't see Ross Archer nod slightly to his dealer then turn carelessly back to his drink on the bar. Hale's lean body appeared to be relaxed in his chair, but his rope-calloused right hand rested on the green baize table edge within inches of his hitched-up gun.

Hale had called for but one card. He had shoved his last few stacks of chips to the center of the table. It was no time to think of all that rode with the bits of ivory, his last.

For all of Tom Hale's chips were down. It represented all that his father had left him. His small whiteface herd, and the Circle-Dot spread. Along with that rode his only hope to claim Clara Carter, the beautiful but willful daughter of a poor hill rancher.

Tom Hale's mind was clear although his cheek-bones were flushed with drinking, and his black hair was tousled. He had played out his string to this final falling of a card and he knew it, but he tried not to think about that.

Two other players had shuffled their boots, moving back from the table. Joe Hooker and Clem Mallot were out of it. Hale didn't permit his eyes to stray from dealer Claiborne's hands.

"I'll take one card," Hale had said.

"Another card, Claiborne," said Hale. "And off the top of the deck."

The card appeared on the table with magical suddenness. But Hale let the card lay there. His leathery young face tightened and seemed whiter against his shock of metallic black hair.

"Another card, Claiborne," said Hale almost softly. "And off the top of the deck!"

Hooker and Mallot used their heels to push their chairs farther back. Hale didn't see the slightly cynical smile on the smooth-shaven face of Ross Archer. Probably no other man noticed the smile, for Archer hadn't turned his head and his curled lips showed only in the bar mirror.

Claiborne betrayed no emotion on his hawkish face.

"You've five seconds, Hale, to pick up your card," said Claiborne, and his

knuckles had rapped out three seconds while he was speaking.

In the remaining seconds Claiborne's derringer had come into his hand. The dealer's gun-speed was a tradition. There was but one man in the half-filled saloon who had any idea that Claiborne could be beaten on an open draw. Unfortunately for Claiborne that man was Tom Hale.

Hale's .45 exploded over the table edge. Claiborne's derringer fell as the dealer's face flopped on the green baize. The shot had hit so dead center that blood didn't have time to show on the dealer's white shirt before he fell.

The lone piano plunked away mournfully in the hush. Tom Hale made his first error. He kicked his chair back and stood up, his gun covering the room. He looked at Ross Archer.

"You saw all of it, Archer. Claiborne made his draw, his derringer was out."

There was too much friendliness in Archer's voice for a man who had just lost the best dealer north of Salt Lake. Osage was in the Blue Grass Valley of Montana, the only place in the west where Kentuckians had succeeded in making the famed grass grow.

"I'm agreein', Tom, on your word," said Archer. "Have a drink before the law arrives."

Hale was walking toward the bar when long-nosed Joe Hooker spoke raspingly.

"It's a damn lie, Archer! Claiborne didn't draw. I know he wasn't totin' his iron tonight."

Hale bore down his .45 upon Hooker. "You're lyin' through your nose, Joe. Mallot saw the derringer go under the table!"

"Didn't see Claiborne go for a gun," drawled Clem Mallot with a twisted grin. "Don't see any derringer on the floor."

Tom Hale was too dumbfounded to savvy the play until he heard Ross Archer.

"That's a hoss of another color. I'll have a look-see. Stay put, Hale."

Hale had been hitting it hard for more than a week. He had yielded to the willful appeal of Clara Carter. The Montana sweet grass country had fashioned a girl more tempestuous and more desirable in the golden-haired, shapely Clara than it had been the luck of Tom Hale to ever meet up with before.

Because he wanted the girl to have what life had hitherto denied her, Hale had started his first wild fling at Ross Archer's games in Osage. He had lost all of his savings. If he hadn't spotted Claiborne's crooked dealing, his Circle-Dot and his whitefaced herd would now be in the pot.

Only his alertness had pulled him out this far. Now he could see that Joe Hooker and Clem Mallot were as much Archer's men as Claiborne had been. Hale was suddenly too sober and too smart to pass on the sandy that was obviously being run.

Hale whipped his gun around, centering upon Archer.

"Dally your loop sudden, Archer!" Hale's voice was chilled. "Your hired slicks are too pat with their story. I'm holding the hammer and the first ranny makin' a reach won't see the boss live to pay off."

ROSS ARCHER put out a hand, palm open. He could buy a dozen back-shooting gulchers for a night's take in the *Lost Lode,* but he wasn't inviting sure lead in his own well-fed paunch. He held up all gunplay, but his smile was black and icy.

"Your hand, Hale," he said. "There's enough witnesses to say you drilled Claiborne when he was unarmed."

If there had been any of the killing urge in Hale he would have given Archer a fast ticket to Boothill. He was flooded with the sort of anger that made him want to smash Archer's smiling mouth, and have the feel of bruising his knuckles on the saloon owner's jaw. But that could wait. He started for the front of the saloon, uncertain of what his next move would be.

Hale's shoulders pushed the batwings open.

"Steady, Tom! Give me the gun!"

The clipped voice of Sheriff Andrews came from behind. Hale had known the graying lawman ever since he could remember. Every cowman in the county of Blue Grass Valley respected the sheriff, a square shooter who stuck to the letter of the law and who had never sold a favor for either friendship or gold.

Hale knew therefore, when the hard hand of the lawman fell upon his shoulder, that he could expect exact fairness.

But Hale's mind was as quick as his

gunhand had been. He could understand how Ross Archer had laid a murder trap. Archer had learned enough of Hale to know that a gunsmoke showdown must come of Claiborne's crooked dealing. Either way it had turned out, Archer stood to win.

If Hale had been killed, the field would have been cleared for what Archer had in mind. With Claiborne apparently murdered, the same result had been attained.

Hale would no longer stand between Archer and Clara Carter who, the arrogant saloon and ranch-owner believed, could easily be persuaded to accept the position he had to offer her.

It was the cold, hard logic of this that decided Hale his only chance lay outside the law.

Hale played it as if the game was up and there was nothing but surrender left. He shrugged his wide shoulders resignedly. He dropped his gun hand limply, starting to turn slowly.

Then Hale completed the movement with a swift pivot and his fist blurred into the sheriff's grizzly face. The lawman was as tough as they came, but his angular jaw took the full impact of knuckles with 180 pounds of Tom Hale behind the fist.

Sheriff Andrews toppled, his boots clearing the plank walk. A chorus of profane yells burst from the saloon. Archer yelled.

"Get 'im now! Cut 'im down!"

" 'Scuse it, Sheriff," grunted Hale, seizing the lawman's Peacemaker from its holster.

First bullets through the batwing doors blazed from a gun in the hand of Joe Hooker. Hooker apparently counted on Hale having his back toward him. But Hale whirled, thumbed the sheriff's gun and put lead between Hooker's eyes. That was one crooked Archer witness removed. Hale kept back a rush by splintering the batwings with his guns.

Then the Circle-Dot rancher freed the bay's tie rein and swung aboard. The spooked gelding swerved up the street, heading for the home ranch. Hale had a different idea.

He realized he was in a trap if he continued toward home. It came to Hale that there was only one person, a strangely-quiet woman upon whom he could rely. She was the prematurely graying Hetty Lang, cook at the big Montana House.

On the edge of town Hale drew rein and swung around to scan the moonlit street. No riders showed as yet. Hale had in mind that he could use a word with Hetty Lang.

She had some reason out of the past to hate Ross Archer, Hale knew. And he thought, "I want someone to know the truth before I head out of Osage. She'll pass along the word to Clara."

Hale tied his fiddle-footed bay and went back toward the hotel by back ways. While Sheriff Andrews was getting together a posse, Hale was talking with Hetty at the door of the Montana House kitchen.

Their exchange was brief.

"You've been a fool, Tom," the woman told him. "Clara Carter was maybe born wild and selfish, but she loves you more than all the fineries Archer could give her. Get going now. And don't get yourself caught, that's all, Tom."

As the lights of Osage faded behind young Hale he cursed his own blindness.

"Clara didn't really push me into this gambling deal. I talked myself into trying to get rich the quick and easy way." And he damned himself for having been a tallow-brained fool.

"Archer holds all the tricks now. I'll always be a cold-blooded killer in the eyes of the law," he thought grimly. "I lost the whole shebang on that last deal—my girl, my ranch, and maybe my neck!"

II

TOM HALE reached the gap known as Grizzly Bear pass. Moonlight bared the thousand-foot walls where it appeared as if the devil's own knife had cut straight through volcanic limestone and quartz.

Hale was at the top of the pass where he could look down upon the narrow, winding ribbon that was the Utah-to-Canada stage road. Sheriff Andrews would figure he'd be hitting it north to the border, thought Hale, reining in the bay for a breather. It would be smarter to ride the stage road south apiece, then cut for the hills over Wyoming way.

A clear stream seeped through a slash in the wall. Hale watered the bay. Not until then had it come to him fully the real tight he was in. He was hungry

and except for a lucky dime he had been cleaned right down to the range duds he was wearing.

"No way to cash in on the Circle-Dot," he thought. "And it isn't safe to hire out on any of the mountain ranches for a hundred miles around. Archer sure enough cleaned me slick."

The nervous bay suddenly tossed his head and whinnied. Not far away, where a cross canyon cut into the north wall of the pass, another horse answered.

Hale felt the fear that comes to a fugitive. His hand dropped instinctively to his cedar-butted Colt's.

Then he permitted both hands to hang loosely. His own gun was empty, as was the Peacemaker taken from the sheriff. There was not a single shell in his belt.

Reining the bay around, he set himself to make a dash for the stage road. The second it took to swing the tall horse cleared his mind.

"Hell!" Hale thought. "Sheriff Andrews couldn't possibly have formed a posse in time to pass me."

There was but the single horse trail over the last few stiff miles to Grizzly Bear gap. That meant some hunter or possibly a prospector owned the animal he had heard. A posse couldn't have swung ahead of him so soon.

However, there was another rider far ahead of the sheriff's posse. This rider was mounted on a blue grulla pony and her hair was like silver in the white moonlight.

Clara Carter had a clever brain as well as a pretty face. She had ridden into town that evening in the hopes of stopping Tom's gambling streak. Hearing the shooting she had gotten to the *Lost Lode* in time to see Sheriff Andrews knocked out. Instead of trailing Tom on her blue grulla, the girl had waited at the general store until the Ross Archer version of the saloon killing had been passed around. She knew then how the cards would fall and what would happen to Tom if he were caught.

It was then that she proved as smart as the old sheriff. Clara Carter was ahead of the sheriff in judging that Tom would cut back and make for Grizzly Bear pass.

She was in the saddle of her tough blue grulla before Andrews had his posse mounted. Clara was breathing the dust of Hale's running bay shortly after he took the trail leading to Grizzly Bear pass. The bay outran her grulla but she kept going. Tom Hale was only a short distance ahead of the girl when he pulled rein in the pass.

HEARING no further sound, Hale dismounted, leading the bay quietly toward the break in the wall. The faint light of a fire in the pocket might mean a prospector's camp and maybe a plate of flapjacks or navy beans to fortify him for the long road ahead. Hale shagged in to the narrow trail entering the canyon. Two shadows detached themselves from either side. There was a dull gleam of metal and the rocks of the passage seemed to smash upon his head.

Hale was not quite out. He twisted his locked arms around a pair of greasy boots.

"Get 'im, Curt!"

A kick from a heavy boot drove Hale's ear into his head. He was unaware of being dragged toward a small camp fire.

"Snag the string onto him, Bunt, 'till we find out what's what!" ordered the second man.

Hale's dizziness slowly passed. Through slitted eyes he identified his captors. They were known around Osage as Curt Callan and Bunt Jackson. Hale recollected they had worked on the Utah-Canadian stage line but had been discharged following several holdups. Callan and Jackson were suspected of having tipped off the bandits on money shipments.

Curt Callan was first to recognize the rancher. A kick in Hale's ribs announced his discovery.

"It's Hale of the Circle-Dot!" roared the pot-bellied Callan. "Hiya, wake up! Start talking! It couldn't be you're tracing the hide of a calf and trailing us on your high lonesome?"

"Don't think so, Curt," said Jackson, a nasty looking hombre with most of an ear missing. "That there damn' bay has been ridden so he's all lathered up. What the hell's your hurry, fella, and how come you was skulking onto our camp?"

Hale had been too busy bucking

Archer's games in Osage to have known that one of his cows had been slow elked. And there wasn't time to waste in explanations. The sheriff's posse might be heading this way.

"Didn't know any beef was missing," said Hale. "But if you rannies are on the dodge, you'll hightail out of here. I just killed Claiborne, Archer's card dealer, and a posse will be heading up this way in a hurry."

Callan laughed jeeringly and slapped Hale's face.

"Helluva yarn, that," he said harshly. "But look, Jackson, sashay up the pass and listen if there's sign of riders coming."

The one-eared man forked Hale's saddle and reined toward the main pass.

"You damn' fool!" called Hale. "They'll lead your carcass the minute their eyes light on that bay horse of mine!"

Jackson only growled and promised Hale he'd beat his head in if he was lying.

"I'm on the dodge and I'm not lying," Hale told the bearded Callan. "Archer cleaned me out in his saloon. I want to live long enough to even the score."

Jackson returned, riding fast. "I heard hosses comin'!" he exclaimed. "Douse that fire. Get the hosses into the cave an' I'll bring Hale."

Tom Hale was caught wholly unprepared. The thick-bellied Callan sent him out with a smash of his .45.

Echoes of the oncoming posse sounded along the hollow walls. It would have thrown Hale's mind into a turmoil if he had known of the slim rider who had slipped from a blue grulla pony and remained hidden while Jackson was riding in the pass.

Clara Carter had reined her heaving mount to a stop in time to see Jackson make his scouting dash on Hale's brightly marked bay. The glimpse of the strange rider on Tom's horse puzzled her. She decided she'd better wait before making any moves. Tensely she watched the last faint flicker of the camp fire disappear up the canyon. As the sheriff's posse thundered nearer, Clara pinched her pony's nose, keeping the beast from giving an alarm.

Then suddenly, she realized what she must do to make sure Tom's escape.

Springing into her saddle she rode straight toward the oncoming riders. A dozen hard-faced men were siding Sheriff Andrews.

"Well, I'll be teetotally damned!" exclaimed the lawman as he pulled up. "What in tunket are you doin' up this way in the middle of the night, Miss Clara? You didn't see Tom Hale?"

Clara had known Andrews ever since she was knee-high to a grasshopper. She smiled at him, smiled easily, yet with a touch of challenge.

"I heard all about the killin' in town and I trailed Tom," the girl said. "But I couldn't match the speed of his bay. Tom went on through the pass into the stage road, I'd have gone with him—I don't believe anything those lowdown polecats say about him."

"Can't hold that against you, Clara," growled Andrews. "Won't so much as ask you whether Tom went north or south on the stage road. You wouldn't tell me anyhow if I did ask."

Sheriff Andrews split his small posse, sending some north and others south. The rough, old hand that had long administered the law of the Blue Grass gave Clara Carter's shoulder a kindly pat.

You ain't so far from your home-place, child, and I reckon you'd better head that way. I won't tell you to put Tom Hale out of your mind. I've got a sore jaw, but maybe Tom had his reasons for slugging me. I'm hoping the reasons add up right."

The moonlight brought a greenish glow to Clara's wide eyes. She flung the old lawman a grateful smile as he lifted his hand and swung off after the north-riding posse.

As soon as the sheriff's posse had moved on, Clara soft-footed into the small pocket canyon where she had seen Tom's bay horse vanish. Her pony's shod hoofs made a ringing that alarmed the night silence.

She turned the grulla loose, slapped it away, knowing the pony would make for the Carter ranch less than three miles down the valley. After this, Clara was a shadow following the wall into the pocket canyon.

"I'll take my share of the blame, but I have to bring Tom to his senses," the girl thought. "His best chance is to go back to Osage and face the music."

THE pocket canyon was small. Within a few minutes Clara had found the still-sizzling coals of the camp-fire. She followed the walls of the pocket to its dead-end, but in the darkness she missed the cave hidden behind a natural screen of buck-brush.

Striking a sulphur match, Clara was only a few moments finding the sign of three horses. But the tracks faded among the boulders.

Clara trudged wearily toward home an hour later with nothing but sick fear in her heart. She had no means of identifying the two hombres with Tom, but she was convinced none but long-riders, themselves on the dodge, would have remained hidden from the sheriff's posse.

If that posse catches up with Tom, it will mean a hanging, thought the girl bitterly. Nearly all of that posse were Archer men. The sheriff wouldn't be able to hold them.

The girl was stopped by a sudden idea.

"If there's anyone in Osage can outsmart Archer it's Hetty Lang," she decided.

As if her thoughts had magically brought the queer, gray woman to her, Clara found a buckboard from Osage in the ranch yard. Hetty Lang was sitting alone on the porch.

"Thought you never was coming back, child," said Hetty with a little smile. "Had a notion you'd run off with Tom. Before you tell me what's happened, I have something to ask. I want you to go to Archer's land office tomorrow night and tell him you'll marry him, that you want to be Mrs. Boss Archer."

"I'll fetch you a drink of Pa Carter's brandy, Hetty," said Clara. "It's too much for you, all day in a hot kitchen, then the long drive up here."

"I'll have the brandy, child, to be sure," said Hetty with a curious, little smile upon her pinched lips. "But there's nothing wrong with my mind, like you're thinking. A few days from now will be the greatest in my life. I want to dance at a wedding."

Clara was soon listening to a plan that sent the blood pulsing wildly through her veins.

That it should be proposed by this drab, prematurely gray little woman made it seem all the more loco.

A good many folks in Osage had thought Hetty a little queer. There were others who had passed along bits of gossip that had come down a dozen years to touch the middle-aged woman who toiled seven days a week in a kitchen, yet found time to turn her hand to dressmaking, and turn out creations that were the envy of all.

Clara Carter had a dress that Hetty had given her. It was her only good dress, the one she had worn but a few times to the dances in Blue Grass Valley. It had a tight velvety bodice and flaring skirt.

It was an hour later when Hetty Lang swung the buckboard back toward Osage. She left Clara with a new fire burning in her heart.

Tomorrow night she was to visit Boss Archer alone. She was to do what would be regarded in Osage as a shameful act. She was to offer to become Archer's wife.

And now, as the dust cloud of Hetty Lang's buckboard faded in the moonlight, Clara was praying silently. These two women, one middle-aged, tired and bitter, one young, daring and beautiful, were set to play for stakes higher than any the tables of the *Lost Lode* had ever seen.

III

BEATEN and bleeding, Tom Hale was slowly coming to his senses. The hard, drunken voices of Curt Callan and Bunt Jackson struck like hammer blows into his aching brain.

The pair of renegades were finishing off a quart of fiery rotgut between them.

As their minds fogged up, their tongues began loosening.

Callan walked over and kicked Tom in the ribs. It took guts to repress a groan, but Tom gave no more sign than a dead man.

"So the damn' fool has a notion we didn't think he might be comin' along," grunted Callan. "I might as well let you in on it now, how the boss had it all figured."

Bunt Jackson's speech was thick. "Let's have it, hombre. T'aint healthy for you to hold out on a pardner."

"Well, this is Archer's scheme and he warned me not to talk," growled Callan. "When Hale comes to hisself, he'll be fitten to go all the way Owlhoot to cut even with Archer. The boss has it played smart. We tell Hale how Archer is sendin' a big land payment out on the Green River stage, an' it'll damn' near bust him in Osage if that dinero's lost."

Callan and Jackson drank to that idea, laughing boisterously.

"We'll be makin' out like all Hale has to do is play lookout, while we're holdin' up the stage. Then we'll bust his leg with a bullet," said Callan. "We hightail with the Osage dinero, an' leave Hale to be picked up."

In spite of the splitting ache of his battered head, Tom discovered that anger can be a powerful stimulant. He was fully conscious and he had to exert all of his will-power to keep up the pretense of unconsciousness.

"There might even be a killin'," hinted Callan. "With a human carcass decorating the landscape that thick-skulled Lawdog, Andrews, won't have a chance savin' Hale from a quick lynch-rope."

"Yeah," agreed the drunk Jackson. "How about puttin' some redeye into Hale's gullet an' pushin' him into playin' it the way the boss wants it?"

Tom didn't have to pretend choking over the fiery rotgut that trickled down his throat. It was stuff that would have brought life to a petrified man. As Hale appeared to come to his senses, Callan and Jackson went to work. At first Hale tried to act the part of a sullen, angry prisoner. Gradually he allowed himself to thaw under Callan's drunken cajoling.

"He'll be plumb ruined if we grab his dinero off that stage Friday night," stated Callan. "We ain't got no likin' for Archer, seein' he grabbed land off both of us."

Hale's humor almost betrayed him into laughing. If either Callan or Jackson had ever owned a foot of ground in Blue Grass Valley it had been before his time.

The last of the rotgut was gone. "We'll trail out of here, Hale," said Callan. "This'll be a big haul off the Utah stage. We might hatch up somethin' bigger if you stick with us."

Tom said thickly, "Sure I'm stickin'. A man's a fool to be nursin' cows and getting nothing out of it but hard work. I'm beginning to see where a man with savvy takes what he can get."

A devilish amusement beat tiny sparks in Hale's eyes as he watched the two soggy outlaws. Unconsciously his lean hand brushed the side of his levis where his Colts ordinarily rode.

IT was nearly midnight when Clara Carter rode down the main street of Osage.

She rode into town dressed in her best. The tight bodice and flaring skirts made her appear smaller than she was. But there was vivid fire in her greenish eyes and a glitter to her bright hair that turned the eyes of the cowpunchers.

Ross Archer had a small office apart from the *Lost Lode*. Here it was Archer carried on a land and loan business that was fast giving him a hold upon Blue Grass Valley. Things were coming his way these days, land, cattle and the power that always rides stirrup to stirrup with wealth. But there were still a few things Archer wanted that as yet hadn't fallen into his strong hands. Clara Carter was one of them.

Archer had twice asked Clara to marry him, and she had laughed. Now, as she slowly walked down the warped plank walk toward Archer's office, Clara felt some trepidation. She knew Archer's arrogance and she knew her power to play upon it. But she knew, too, that bucking Archer was a mighty dangerous game for man or woman.

Hetty Lang, primly skirted and bonneted, had paused across the narrow, dusty street. If Clara had noticed, it wouldn't have mattered. The middle-aged woman had her graying hair drawn into

a tight knot. She was as inconspicuous as the hitch-racks that lined the street.

As she paused, watching Clara approach the lighted oblong that was Archer's office window, the lips of Hetty moved soundlessly. Only one person in Osage would have suspected the truth when Hetty touched the front of her black waist briefly. Quiet Hetty Lang, who lived alone in a tin-roofed shack and never was known to visit with her neighbors, had touched a fancy silver-mounted, two-shot derringer she always carried. As she stood in the thick shadows there was almost a maternal protectiveness in her bearing.

Inside the dusty office, bare as a cell except for a spurr-scarred desk and a pair of antlers holding a Winchester 30-30, Archer spoke softly, viciously to a tall sullen man.

"So you got a message that I wanted to see you tonight, did you? I wanted to pay you a thousand? You've got more than that coming!"

The single chair banged the office floor. Heavy shadows mingled in the window light, then fell apart. The small frame building was jolted by a dropping body.

Clara Carter saw a man come hurtling through the doorway. Clem Mallot! She quickly stepped back as Archer exploded with anger into the street.

"I'm not dickering, Mallot! You bring that here before midnight or you can't ride far enough to save your hide!"

Clem Mallot pulled himself up and staggered away muttering curses, while Clara stood quietly in the deep shadows. It struck her once again that Archer was not a nice man to cross. Hetty Lang, she hoped, knew what she was up to.

When, a little later, Clara knocked softly at Ross Archer's office, she was well rehearsed in the part she intended to play. Tom Hale had proved a failure, a killer. Ross Archer had earned his power by his strength. Hetty had said flattery would go a long way with Archer.

Clara found Archer alone. There was a thin smile across his mouth as he kissed her rich warm lips. Clara tried not to shy off as Archer's coarse hands caressed her roughly.

"We understand each other, Clara," said Archer bluntly. "I don't believe you're in love with me but you know what you want. You're coming to me for what I can give you. It's all the same to me. You're the kind of a woman I need to hold my place in Osage."

CLEM MALLOT crossed the small creek in the darkness, at the foot of the street. He was cursing as he entered the shack he called home.

"This is one time Archer is gonna pay, and pay damned big!" thought Mallot, as he pushed open the flimsy door. In his black rage Mallot had failed to see the shadowy figure that had crossed the creek bridge ahead of him.

Inside the foul-smelling shack he closed the door. He turned, striking a match to an oil lamp with a broken chimney. As the light spread there was a rustle behind Mallot. Something firm and hard jabbed his back just in the middle of his sweat-stained vest. His arm swung toward his .45 but stopped as he heard the low deadly voice.

"Hold it, Mallot! This derringer is small but it will blow a hole all the way through your flabby carcass!"

As Mallot raised his hands carefully he glimpsed the woman in his broken mirror. He did not like the tight smile that curved her mouth. Mallot felt his .45 plucked from it's holster.

"Hetty Lang! Folks has been saying you've gone queer in the head. You wanting money?"

Hetty's laugh was low and bitter.

"All I want you to give me is what Ross Archer wouldn't buy," said Hetty quietly.

Mallot replied with a hard oath. "Mebbe you're thinking Archer is the only one who knows you. If folks here find out—"

The pressure of the derringer suddenly left Mallot's back. He started to turn quickly, slapping down with one hand. Hetty Lang's derringer made a spiteful cracking that could not have been heard far outside.

Mallot grunted as lead gouged the flesh of his lower ribs.

"You'll do as I say, Mallot. The other shot in this little gun will go right into the middle of your backbone. You walk out ahead of me, slowly, and up along the creek. One wrong move and I'll kill you."

The pressure was turned, pushing into Mallot's spine.

"But you can't make me. I'll never tell you nothing—"

"Just walk along, Mallot," ordered Hetty. "I wouldn't mind at all if the whole town saw me shoot you down!"

They walked together along the dark side of the creek away from the street lights. They crossed another single-plank bridge at the upper end of town. Mallot was halted suddenly at the rear of a small building.

"You can open that door and walk right in," said Hetty. "I never keep it locked."

Once inside, Clem Mallot unlooped his tongue.

"You think you're respected in Osage because you wear long skirts and you're known as Hetty Lang," said Mallot venomously. "But some of us know that you're the notorious Golden Lou that was in Archer's honkytonk in Utah years ago."

Hetty's voice was mild, "I'm asking for the gun Ross Archer told you to produce by midnight, Mallot."

"Look, Lou—Hetty—if we'd get together it migh tbe worth while. You can't keep me standing here all night."

"That's true enough," said Hetty, and she cracked the barrel of Mallot's own .45 down upon his skull.

Mallot was still out when Hetty had him bound tightly with her clothesline and had pulled his inert body into the darkness of her fruit cellar. The place had no windows.

"Mallot won't raise any rumpus," thought Hetty.

A short time later she had two bedrolls prepared for a quick move. Then she went into the room fronting the street and lit two lamps in the windows.

"When I see Ross Archer again, the folks of Osage will have reason to keep me in their memory," she thought grimly.

HETTY was fine-stitching a girl's shirtwaist when Clara arrived. Hetty's thick-lensed glasses and tightly knotted gray hair made her look well past middle age but there was still a touch of beauty in her fine features. Behind those lenses, the greenish eyes of Hetty were glowing with light that had given her the name of Golden Lou.

Clara looked like little more than a child as she stood there in her flaring dress with the tight bodice.

"So far I have Archer hooked, Hetty," announced the girl. "He believes I'll hitch up with him, and I made sure he was watching me when I came to your cottage."

"That'll work out the way we want, child," said Hetty quietly. "After awhile the lights will go out and Archer will think you're staying here all night. He won't like that, but he'll not do anything but wait."

"And then, Hetty?" Although Clara's face was young and pretty, her curved mouth showed a cynical smile that was much like that to be seen often on the thin lips of Hetty Lang.

"Then, child, I'm fixing you up a good hot, sleepy drink," said Hetty. "When you wake up you will find yourself safe in a little, split-log cabin where there once was a lot of happiness, and where there has been more grief than you'll know in your lifetime, if I can wish it that way."

The vivid Clara never had been able to read Hetty Lang or understand many of the things she said.

"Maybe I'm a fool for still wanting to marry a wild one like Tom Hale," said Clara. "Tom made such a fool of himself.

"Many men are fools," said Hetty. "And many women."

There was one thing the Golden Lou of other years had not forgotten, and that was the mixing of a potent drink. It was a strangely laden buckboard that moved out of Osage after midnight, drawn by a pair of matched sorrels.

Hetty handled the reins. At her feet was the tightly-bound Clem Mallot. Well covered with straw and bedclothing, Clara slept in the rear of the buckboard as peacefully as if in her bed at home.

Hetty gave no sign that she saw the bulky figure of Ross Archer in the lighted front of his saloon, but she was aware that he watched her driving from town, apparently alone.

"He'll remember the past dozen years and think nothing of it," thought Hetty. "He knows it's one anniversary that I've never missed."

In all of the Blue Grass Valley no woman ever kept a stranger date with a memory than this.

As she neared the jail and sheriff's office, Hetty made sure she had passed from Archer's line of vision. She stepped quickly from the buckboard and slipped an envelope under Sheriff Andrews' door.

In the envelope which Sheriff Andrews would find in the morning, were two brief notes. One was simple and direct—

Sheriff—Be at my old stage road cabin at four o'clock tomorrow. Come prepared for gun-trouble and the law may get a break. With this is a sealed note I wish delivered to Ross Archer late tomorrow afternoon.

Hetty Lang (Golden Lou)

Hetty was sure the sheriff would smile over those two names.

Daylight was beginning to streak the bluffs along Evening Creek where it crossed the Canadian-Utah stage road when Hetty pulled up the sorrels. The clatter of a running horse came faintly, then drew to a furious drumming as the rider drew nearer.

Hetty pulled to one side of the narrow wagon trail. She put her hand on the heavy .45 she had taken from Mallot. There was just enough of the fading moon to reveal a big bay horse and its rider as they drew up beside the buckboard.

"Tom?" exclaimed Hetty. "You damn fool!"

"You named me plumb right, Hetty," said Tom. "But not for what you're thinkin.' I've been a fool all around, but just now I'm takin' a chance to maybe save some lives an' fetch help to scotch a pair o' snakes."

He was quick to ask about Clara, but Hetty told him only part of the truth. She didn't let Tom know the girl was sleeping within a few feet of him. Nor did she make known the presence of Clem Mallot under the blanket near her feet.

"Reckon Clara's fit as can be," Hetty said cheerfully. "Maybe you don't know that if Clara hadn't trailed you and then misdirected a sheriff's posse, you might right now be stretching a hangrope."

"Clara trailed me to the pass?" Hale's voice was unbelieving.

"And lost your somewhere in a pocket canyon while she was double looping her tongue to Sheriff Andrews about you hitting out on the stage road. You'd better get back to cover, Tom. If you're caught now, Archer still has the hardcases to stir up a lynch mob."

Tom nodded. "I've got to get word to Sheriff Andrews, and make it back before it's full light."

Hale's next words took away Hetty's breath, and yet brought back a memory of long years before that was the reason for her keeping this strange anniversary in a creek trail cabin.

"I'm all set to be in on the holdin' up of the Utah stage going south tonight, Hetty," stated Tom calmly. "Me and Curt Callan and Bunt Jackson."

NO person knowing the quiet, drab cook of the Montana House for the past dozen years would have believed the lurid vocabulary she possessed. Tom Hale waited with a hard smile on his young face until Hetty ran out of breath.

"I had to play along with Callan and Jackson," he explained. "But right now they're so hog drunk they don't know I left camp. I had it worked out to cross them up, but I got to thinking that if I missed out on getting them quick enough, there might be a killing I couldn't stop."

When she had the whole story Hetty gave a hard laugh.

"But I got to ponderin' on it," Tom said. "I ain't for shooting even such vermin as them in the back, as I'd have to do. And maybe they're smart enough to figure out that my hatin' Archer ain't enough to turn me all the way outlaw."

Hetty nodded agreement. She was quick to see that Tom couldn't square himself for the supposed murder of Claiborne by trapping such worthless scum as Callan and Jackson. She said abruptly, "You hightail back to your new pardners. I'll guarantee that the sheriff gets the word about the stage holdup. He's due at my old cabin tomorrow afternoon."

Tom bent from the saddle and patted Hetty Lang's shoulder before he reined the bay around and loped back toward the stage road below Grizzly Bear pass. He felt he could trust this strange woman all the way.

IV

DAYLIGHT struck across the wagon trail along Evening Creek. In the hour before, just ahead of sunrise, Tom slipped from his saddle on the boulder-strewn mesa overlooking the Canadian-Utah stage road. This hideaway of Callan and Jackson had been missed by possemen because there had seemed no possible trail up the sheer sides.

But there was a mesquite-hidden trail, and it was up this that Tom Hale had brought his bay horse. As he dismounted he made his way noiselessly down the rocky gully. He had left Callan and Jackson stretched out, so saturated with rot-gut it seemed they would sleep for hours.

Now in the dim light Hale halted abruptly. His hand went to one of the two guns he was wearing, Callan was still inert. But the blanket roll nearby was empty.

The only sound was the snoring of Curt Callan.

Hale's eyes darted to the dark pockets of rock around him. His caution was wasted. The hard point of a gun was rammed into his side as Bunt Jackson indianed from behind a redstone outcropping.

"Runnin' a sandy, huh?" grated the one-eared man. "It'll be your last one, Hale!"

The ugly outlaw had sobered, but he had a mean, hangover temper. Hale's quick reply supplied possibly the only answer that could have saved his life.

"Yup, Jackson. With the moon down, I took a short trail I know to the Circle-Dot. I figured we'd be dying for another drink when that stuff gave out. Have a look, fella."

Without moving from Jackson's gun point Hale bent over his saddle bag. He came up with a quart of red-eye in each hand.

"Had it hid out. It's better than the hell-fire we've been guzzling. Have a snort."

Jackson's dry tongue licked his thick lips, but his eyes were primed with suspicion.

"Hit it yourself first, Hale!" he rasped.

Hale laughed as if his next move didn't mean his life. He batted out the cork and turned up the bottle, letting the whiskey gurgle. He had been telling the truth. That better grade stuff had been taken from a lime house far up on the Circle-Dot.

Bringing the extra red-eye had been a second thought after he had met up with Hetty Lang, but it was thinking that saved him from having his belly ripped by lead.

A few minutes later Jackson was revelling in the rot-gut. Tom made it appear that he had swallowed a great deal more than went past his throat.

He dozed. But he was aware each time Callan or Jackson beat down their terrific hangovers by hitting the new bottles. And his tense hands never strayed for from his holstered Colts.

Tom knew the stage to Utah was not due to swing along below their gulch hide-out shortly before sundown. It was possible, though, that his two compadres might have decided to jump him up here before the holdup even started. Especially when they were drunk there was no telling what Callan and Jackson might do.

WELL along in the day, Clara awoke with a headachy sensation and a queer weakness that made it too much of an effort to get up from the bed on which she was lying. She could see Hetty Lang moving about in the small cabin that was as neat as a pin.

It was Clara Carter's first experience with a hangover, and she wasn't enjoying it. Easing her head with a cold towel. Hetty smiled.

"Don't talk, child," she admonished. Mallot is sleeping in the other room."

"Mallot here?" Clara's face went pale. "Has he told you anything?"

Hetty put a finger to her lips and shook her head. Then she said in a low tone.

"He'd be afraid to talk to me, child. But I expect when he suddenly walks out and bumps into Ross Archer he may talk a little then. Ross isn't going to like finding Mallot here."

The girl's eyes widened. "Then Archer knows where Mallot is?"

"No, but he knows that you are here child, and the way he's finding it out makes it look like I'd kidnaped you and brought you to my cabin."

"You're funny, Hetty, and I don't understand you."

The grayhaired woman smiled.

"I've been nearly twenty years trying to understand myself. I've lived two lives in that time. I was a new bride when I came to live with Bill Lang in this same cabin. Before I met Bill I had everything a girl could want. School, dresses, money to spend, about everything a rich father could give me. But I gave up all that and come to live in this cabin as happy as any girl could be."

Clara couldn't quite picture Hetty as a young and happy bride. Hetty Lang proved her instant understanding.

"Before you marry Tom Hale I want you to hear this. Bill didn't wash much gold from his claim. After three months I told Bill I must have the things I'd given up. Bill swore at me that day for the first time. Then he said he would get me the things I wanted, any way he could get them, or he wouldn't come back. He never did come back."

Clara stared at the woman.

"I'd heard some talk around Osage—something about you knowing Ross Archer in Salt Lake—"

"Yes," said Hetty quickly. "They say I was known as Golden Lou. That's true, Clara. I was in Salt Lake a few years. Then I came back to Osage and tried to forget I was Golden Lou. But Archer came to Osage and opened the *Lost Lode* saloon. That kept me from ever forgetting the past."

There was something the girl could not understand.

"What happened to your husband?"

Hetty smiled, "I knew you were going to ask that question. He went to jail. For a stage holdup. But this afternoon Bill Lang is coming up that trail. He was released from prison three days ago."

Shadows were lengthening beyond Evening Creek. Hetty had become restive. She had taken off her glasses and done her hair so it framed her face. She was almost pretty again. A warmth had come back to Hetty Lang. It made Clara think of her for the first time as a woman and not as just a drab kitchen cook of the Montana House.

Impatience and worry had begun to break through Hetty's calm. She kept peering down the trail toward Osage.

"That stage to Utah sometimes makes extra time down the grade. Tom Hale's in a tight with them Archer gunslicks."

But there was no sign of riders coming up from Osage way. Hetty went into the inner room and came out with a shining Winchester.

"I made Bill promise never to touch another gun," said Hetty, half to herself.

There was still no sign of Osage riders. The Utah stage was due to pass in less than an hour.

Suddenly there came the faint clinking of hoofs across the creek. Rifle in hand, Hetty stepped to the door. Clara heard her speak with one hand touching her throat.

"Lord's in his Heaven—Bill!" was all Hetty said.

Clara could see down the trail. The sun slanted through slivery leaves of mountain ash along the tumbling creek.

The shining rifle lay in the yellow dust beside the cabin doorway as Hetty ran out to the laurel bushes. The man riding up the creek was tall and stoop-shouldered. His face appeared pinched, and his hair was gray and thin.

It had been nigh twenty years, yet neither Hetty nor Bill cried out. When the man saw Hetty he swung from the saddle and dropped the reins. In spite of a limp he came swiftly toward Hetty.

Hetty had unpinned her hair and its gray silver cascaded over her shoulders. Tears crowded Clara's eyes as she saw Hetty take the tired man into her arms.

Their words surprised Clara.

"It seems good to have you home, Bill," said Hetty, simply.

"Why, it's like when I went away," said Bill, his eyes taking in the cabin nestled under the red bluffs.

They came toward Clara.

"This is Clara Carter," said Hetty.

Bill Lang smiled briefly and turned back at once to Hetty.

"I have dinner ready, Bill," said Hetty. "Clara, we won't be long."

Hetty picked up the Winchester rifle. Bill followed her into the cabin.

In a little while Hetty came to the door to stare through tight lids down the winding road that led to town. No sign of man.

Hetty glanced down at Clara leaning back against the peeled-log walls.

"Sheriff Andrews must have got that note," she said. Clara did not understand. "There ain't much time."

Some of Hetty's worry reached Clara.

"Not much time?"

Hetty was studying the sun. "Stage is due in less than an hour," she said as though talking to herself. "Like as not the sheriff would hold back until Archer rides up the trail."

"What will happen if the sheriff doesn't come," demanded Clara.

Far up the divide came a sweep of dust. Toy horses drawing a stage. Hetty turned and ran back into the cabin. Despair shrilled her voice. "Why did the stage have to come ahead of time tonight?"

Fearfully, yet not knowing why she was frightened, Clara watched the Concord stage as it spun down the winding grade that dipped and crossed the end of Grizzly Bear pass.

A minute later Hetty came to the doorway, her husband by her side. Excitement flushed Lang's prison pallor.

Bill Lang strode to his ground-hitched pony.

Quickly he was in the saddle, the shiny old Winchester across the pommel.

"I'll hit the short-cut, Hetty. Adio'cito!" he called back.

He swung his horse and set him recklessly at a dim cattle trail behind the cabin.

Fear-drenched Clara. She put her hand to Hetty's arm.

"Does it mean Tom's gone in on a stage holdup, Hetty?"

Hetty's reaction was unexpected, almost violent, as if anger riled her.

"Take your hand away! Don't touch me!"

Clara stepped back, her eyes wide with tears. Bill Lang was still in view, outlined for a moment against the yellowing sky.

The snapping of guns started up beyond the piñons.

At this moment Sheriff Andrews and two deputies loped into sight. The lawmen heeled their horses to a run when the cracking of guns increased.

As the sheriff and his men splashed through the creek, Hetty cried out shrilly. "Don't shoot Bill Lang or Tom Hale, Sheriff Andrews."

V

IN A buckbrush-screened hollow close to the stage road, Tom had snatched at a last moment of rest before he judged there would be need for action. The Circle-Dot rancher had counted greatly on the promise and shrewdness of Hetty Lang. He was hoping that the winding stage road was already covered by the deputies of Sheriff Andrews. As for himself, his head was clear and his guns were clean. His own .44 was tucked in its holster. The huge old Peacemaker, taken from the sheriff, was stuffed into the waistband of his levis.

There came the faint clinking of metal on stone. The yell of the driver hitting the downhill grade, a few miles away, came to the three waiting men, Hale, Callan and Jackson.

Fired by the meanness of hangovers from the two-day spree, Callan and Jackson were ripe for hell. Hale was reluctantly climbing to his feet when the thudding weight of Jackson landed on him.

"Stay far off enough to leave no powder. Clip lead through his leg!"

Jackson's hard fist drove Tom's head into the ground. Rolling and kicking as he fought to unseat Jackson, Tom felt his own gun pulled from his holster. He got but one break. He had been stretched on his stomach, lying on soft ground. The shape of the sheriff's old Peacemaker was a hard lump against his belly.

Callan and Jackson had to move fast. The Utah stage was already roaring down the grade. They had been lying in wait at the top of a steep, brush-covered wall, directly above the road.

Tom heard the crack of the .45 clearly enough. The jolt of the lead was a numbing all-over blow that crossed his left leg and fountained through him, spilling his strength.

Callan and Jackson had sprung away. Hale heard them mounting their horses. He reached for the Peacemaker but they had clattered over the shaly bank before he could gather himself. A burning agony ran all the way up his side when he moved.

It seemed like an eternity, yet it could have been no more than a minute before Hale dragged himself to the edge of the wall looking down the thorny bush onto

the stage road. He keened his ears with the hope of hearing the arrival of the help that Hetty Lang had promised.

Only the pounding of the stage horses' steel shoes on the hard-packed grade of the road reached him. Then everything became dream-like; a dream in which he had no part.

He saw Jackson spur his horse into the stage road. He saw the mushroom of smoke from Jackson's carbine. The driver slid sidewise from his seat, dropping the buckskins' leathers. Running to one side, the stage ponies tilted the vehicle queerly, although it did not go over.

A woman screamed from inside the stage. Callan was lying low on his roan horse on the other side of the tilting stage.

The distance was too great for the old Peacemaker that Tom Hale had instinctively dragged into his hand. He might have knocked Jackson from his horse with a bullet in the back, but Callan, at the greater distance, was about to carry out the most ruthless part of Archer's plan.

Callan was riding up from the rear of the slowing stage. Gripping a .45 in each hand, he obviously intended to riddle the passengers through the light woodwork.

The white-faced shotgun guard, reins snubbed around his middle, shoved the moneybox from under his feet. It landed close to Jackson.

Jackson made the mistake of sliding from his saddle to grab up the box. That gave Tom his one slim chance.

Tom judged the distance of a downward plunge over the wall through the thorny bush. Setting himself rigidly, he straightened his right leg and pushed off. Mesquite and buckbrush whipped the brown mask that was his face. His leg felt as if a branding iron was being driven through and through. But still Hale kept sliding. A few more yards would bring him within range for the hungry gun in his hand.

Taken by surprise, Callan's .45s weaved from the back of the stage toward Tom Hale. Then they kicked in his hands, first the right gun, then the left. Tom could feel the heavy slugs mushrooming around him.

Feeling as if his left arm had been busted along with his leg, Tom Hale landed in the rocks beside the road. Grimly, he steadied himself, taking aim on Callan's thick body. His mind was speeding so fast he only knew that the Peacemaker was jumping and bucking in his hand. Callan was swept out of the saddle by the solid blast of lead that tempted all six shells in the old Peacemaker.

Jackson overcame his greed for the money box long enough to swing his carbine in Hale's direction.

"This way, busky!" rapped out the voice of a mounted man on the bank above Hale. "I should shoot you down like a dog, but get your gun in play."

Jackson swung, and his carbine whipped up. He got off one shot and the pale-faced man flinched. Then the Winchester the pale-faced man held rippled blue smoke, once, twice.

Bunt Jackson crumpled down over the money box.

Tom was still staring at the man on the bank above him when the edged voice of Sheriff Andrews rang out as three lawmen galloped up the road.

HETTY LANG was in the cabin doorway, peering into the deepening darkness as a rider splashed his horse through the shallow creek. Hetty stepped back, touched Clara's arm.

"Get to one side and stay in the shadow of the fireplace, child," she said quickly.

The girl was in the darkest corner of the small room when the bulk of Ross Archer filled the doorway.

"Hetty! Hetty Lang!" The voice was loud, imperative. "I've come for Clara! Don't try any foolishness!"

Clara saw a pale glow in the next room. Then the smoky kerosene lantern was turned down low, faintly illuminating the doorway leading into the other room.

"Hetty Lang! Where's the girl? If anything's happened to her—"

"Nothing will happen to Clara," came the calm voice of Hetty.

Archer swore and strode into the shadowy room.

"Go ahead, Mallot," commanded Hetty. "Ross Archer demanded that Claiborne derringer. Give Mr. Archer what he's asking for!"

"No, Hetty, you wouldn't—"

That was Clem Mallot, mumbling a protest. It was almost as if he had been mesmerized by this strong-willed woman.

"The devil I wouldn't," and Hetty's voice was quiet again. Too quiet.

Boots shuffled. Then Mallot staggered into the lighted doorway of the inner room. His eyes were bloodshot and his mouth worked nervously. But his hand was coming from his coat pocket, lifting a silver-mounted two-shot derringer.

"Put that gun away, Mallot," ordered Archer. Uncertainty tinged the voice of Osage's king-pin. He couldn't quite make out what Mallot's game might be. "Drop that gun," he repeated.

Mallot's hand moved toward his pocket.

Those cynical eyes of Hetty Lang watched Archer. She said, "Mallot broke down an' told Clara and me how neatly you framed Tom Hale."

Archer stared at Mallot.

"You squealed, did you?" said Archer. His voice was soft.

Mallot cried, "I swear I didn't, Boss."

But he might as well have been screeching to himself. Archer was already snapping his gun from a shoulder holster.

"No, Archer, no . . ." Mallot's plea retched from his very soul, and it was a coward's soul. He did not think to use the little pistol he held in his hand.

Archer's gun bucked once, twice. Dust lifted from Mallot's chest. His bleary eyes showed pain, and then he dropped heavily to the rough planks, the silver-mounted derringer skidding from him.

Archer was taking a long stride toward the derringer that had fallen from Mallot's hand when Hetty spoke softly. "Don't touch it, Archer. Drop your gun or I'll split your wishbone like I'd ought to have done a long time ago."

Archer glanced at the .45 that Hetty held so steadily. He started to argue, to threaten, when the hard voice of Sheriff Andrews interrupted.

"Do as Hetty says, Archer. I reckon between you and Mallot, you jest about cleared Tom Hale. And I got a shot-up stage robber who claims he rides for you. Looks like you'll stretch hang-rope."

Archer was not the man to loose his head easily but he lost it now. Too much had happened in too short a time.

"Maybe you figure I'm corraled . . ." he started, and the snub-barreled weapon in Archer's big paw angled at Andrews. It never fired. Archer spun all the way around. One shot, but the sheriff's bullet took Archer high in the chest, on the heart-side. The big man's mouth went loose. He fell to his knees, toppled over like an old horse that has run too far.

Andrew holstered his gun. "Ross Archer was long overdue in Hell," he said briefly. Then he looked at Hetty Lang and his eyes twinkled. "You sure figure close," he told her.

Sighting Bill Lang's wishbone figure coming in the doorway, Hetty smiled. "As long as I figured right, that's what counts."

Clara had gone out into the twilight to find Tom Hale; a weary, gaunt, wounded Tom Hale. But he smiled at her and she smiled back. She was helping him from his Morse when Andrews was suddenly beside her.

"Is it all right?" said Clara.

The sheriff stroked his mustache. "Helping a wanted man again, that's a dangerous game," he said. Then he saw the worry and fear in Clara's face. "Lets git him down. I ain't holding Tom Hale!"

Two days later Clara stood beside the bunk in Hetty's cabin clasping Tom's lean hand as Parson Overman mumbled the golden words. Few brides had ever looked happier or had more to be happy about than Clara Carter. She was wearing Hetty's wedding dress that had lain for two decades in the bull-hide trunk up in the small attic.

As the parson, who buried a lot more people than he married, droned on, Bill Lang smiled down at Hetty. "You looked like that the day we got married, Hetty."

"She's a lot like I used to be. Wild and headstrong," Hetty Lang whispered. "She could be our own daughter.

Bill Lang bent over and touched Hetty's hair. Nobody noticed except Tom Hale from his rawhide-bottomed bunk.

"A man is lucky to have friends," Tom thought. "Bill Lang and me, we'll make the Circle-Dot the best damn spread in Blue Grass Valley."

VULTURE-BAIT

By AL STORM

Arizona's Yucca City was no place for the Hendrix brothers. But one of them aimed to stick around; aimed to shake the stuffin' out of the danged town and find out who tagged the other with a murder rap.

THE POSTOFFICE went dead silent as Ray Hendrix stepped through the door. He stopped automatically, feeling a tension pull at his nerves as he glanced questioningly at the loafers. A few met his eye long enough to nod briefly. Others eyed him with malicious enjoyment.

It was then that he saw the reward fliers, and the picture that stared at him like an image from a mirror of ten years ago.

Dead or alive, the flier read, *wanted at Yucca City, Arizona, for robbery and murder.*

Ray Hendrix turned slowly. "If you think that's me, why not start collecting your blood money?"

"His name is Hendrix," Punter Cardiff said nastily. "He looks like you, and he's named like you, and—"

"And it says he .45-blasted a man's ribs through his lungs," Ray Hendrix murmured. "Wants that to be the same, too?"

Cardiff's beefy face went white. He licked his lips. "Just funnin', Hendrix," he whined. "Warn't meanin' nothin' personal. We all know you was here last month when that hombre—"

But Ray Hendrix had left.

THE same hushed chill fell across the Rainbow Saloon at Yucca City, Arizona, when a dust-streaked, bewhiskered Ray Hendrix shoved through the batwings. One hombre began blustering—"By the unholy damn—" but something about Hendrix' lean hard face and cold eyes stopped him.

Hendrix ordered a whiskey and turned to face the room. "I'm Hendrix," he said. "Slim Hendrix' brother. And I aim to shake Yucca City until the stuffin' flies outta joints and I find who tagged Slim with a murder charge."

Ray Hendrix sipped his drink and let the whiskey ease the aching of his saddle-weary bones. He ordered another, half turning to watch while the rat-faced bartender poured it. Under his eye the barkeep's hands began shaking and the man stepped hastily back away from the drinker.

The batwing doors hinged back with a clatter as a portly, bull-shouldered man stalked in. A rich coffee-brown sombrero rode his leonine head at an angle. Gleaming silk showed above the flowered vest and broadcloth long coat. His glance swept the saloon, touched fleetingly on the travel-stained figure at the bar, and then flicked away disdainfully.

"Cigars, Tippy," the man said. "Four Hand-Mades."

The barkeep sidled past Hendrix and scuttled to the cigar counter.

Hendrix noted the haste with which the barkeep shoved out four cigars from a box under the counter. The barkeep whispered something, and the beefy hombre shot a glance at Hendrix.

"Stranger," he scowled. "There's no place in Yucca City for a Hendrix unless it's six-by-three out on the hill. You made a bad mistake coming here. It'll be a worse mistake to stay."

Hendrix eyed the paunch-bellied man from sombrero to boot-toes. Beef-belly continued.

"My good friend and neighbor, Charley Bates, trusted a Hendrix. Raised a Hendrix like he was his own son, and now Charley's dead because—"

Hendrix reached out and jerked a cigar from the fancy flowered vest. He stuck it between his teeth and grinned at the fat man.

"Keep talkin' wind-bag. Sing your song while you've still got teeth."

The paunchy jaw dropped. The man lunged for the cigar in Hendrix' teeth. Ray's knotted fist scrambled the big man's mouth, throwing him against the cigar counter which went down in a jangling clatter of splintered glass.

Hendrix' glance swept the saloon. No man moved to interfere. He backed toward the door, but no man took up the challenge. The barkeep was moaning. Hendrix felt the slatted doors against his shoulder blades. He went out with a bound. He stood for a few minutes, body pressed tight against the adobe wall beside the door in the flickering light of the kerosene torches.

The batwings edged open; a man looked out, full into Ray Hendrix' scowling features. The man squawked and nearly tore his head off getting back inside.

Hendrix backed straight out into the street until he was beyond the light cast by the torches. He gained the walk on the far side of the street and stood in the shadow.

IT was eleven years since he'd left old Charley Bates' Fence Rail outfit and began fiddle-footing. Old Charley, who'd wet-nursed the Hendrix kids into manhood after their parents drowned in a flash flood. Old Charley—now dead, and the eleven years he'd been away stretched until Ray Hendrix began wondering if any man in Yucca City could remember the love there had been between the gruff old rancher

and the harem-scarum young hellion who'd told him adios long years ago.

Dragging a match across his thumb nail, Hendrix drew deeply on the cigar that was still clenched in his teeth. Bitter acrid smoke ate the lining of his mouth and he jerked the cigar away. Where the flame had eaten into it the roll was spreading, shedding its outer tobacco leaf; and Hendrix could see a whitish glint of paper rolled inside.

He pulled it free to stare wonderingly. A saucy, bare-shouldered young woman flirted brazenly from the small picture he held. A shapely piece, he decided appreciatively, and then the grin was wiped from his lips. He held the picture to the light spilling from the window next door. There was no mistaking the gunbelt she had draped around her shapely hips. The embossed, hand tooled leather work showed plain. It was Slim's, the gunbelt and six-gun Ray had sent his kid brother less than six months ago.

Shoving the picture into his shirt pocket, Ray crossed the street to the Rainbow Saloon. Men milled about the batwings. He crowded in, keeping his sombrero low across his eyes.

". . . smashed Chink Bostwick in the mouth and left," a shrill, ragged voice was reciting excitedly. "Chink's got Pike Sorrell and his whole guncrew out lookin' for that hombre. Toughest, coolest gunslick . . ." The voice broke off on a high, unfinished note as Ray appeared at the bar.

The quiet spread ominously.

"Where's the barkeep who sold Chink Bostwick those cigars," he yelled out.

Nobody answered. Hendrix repeated the question. A man spread his hands helplessly.

"He left with Chink Bostwick. Don't know where he went."

JUDGE HARPER peered over the tops of his glasses in annoyance as the stranger barged into his office. Then the Judge was getting to his feet, hand outstretched.

"Hendrix, by Henry!" the Judge chuckled. "Reckon you must be the gent as gave Chink Bostwick his come-uppance. Charley Bates always said you was—"

"And now Charley is dead," Ray cut in. "Old Charley is dead, the Fence Rail outfit is about to go under the hammer to satisfy a mortgage that you know blamed well Charley wouldn't have made . . . and not a man in Yucca City dares open his head unless it's to blame a Hendrix!"

The Judge stiffened, his face flushing and hardening with temper. "I'm not satisfied about that mortgage Chink Bostwick turned up with so I've stayed foreclosure for a time," he snapped testily. "And that chip on your shoulder doesn't scare me. This country has been scoured from the Vulture mountains to Hell's Sink and west clean to San Runo. Slim Hendrix is gone and so is the money old Charley Bates got for sellin' nine hundred head of steers." The Judge glared frostily.

"You came into this town primed for trouble, figurin' to prop up one corner of hell and uncover a lot of answers. Well, you figure it out, Mister.

Judge Harper and Charley Bates had been cronies for more years than either could remember, Hendrix knew. The Judge was tough and shrewd and honest beyond question. His opinion was tantamount to judgment, unswayed by threat or bribe or solicitude. Facing the bite of the Judge's cool eyes Hendrix felt his shoulders sag and an aching weariness of doubt unnerved him. Reluctantly he voiced the fear that he couldn't quite throw off.

"Was it Slim, Judge? I haven't seen the boy in eleven years. He might have strayed—"

The Judge loosened his mouth in a half smile and waved Hendrix into a chair.

"I don't know," the Judge admitted. "Slim drove Charley out of town in the Fence Rail buckboard and Charley was carryin' that roll . . . never believed in banks, you know. Well, Reese Meester found Charley lyin' in the chaparral dead, shot through the heart from the side. His vest was burned like maybe a gun was sneaked up and laid plumb ag'in him and then fired. His pockets was turned wrong side out.

"The Fence Rail outfit and a posse from town started lookin' for Slim . . . found the buckboard wrecked in the Vultures below Mile High Curve like maybe Slim been tryin' a getaway run and went off the cliff. Both horses were killed but no sign of Slim."

Hendrix took the flame-scorched picture from his shirt pocket and handed it to the Judge.

Harper shook his head. "Stranger to me. Might be any woman atween here'n Texas. Might even be any one of the doxies at *la Nidada de la Vibora.*"

The Nest of the Viper! Legendary hide-out for outlaws from both sides of the border. Buried somewhere in the wilds of the Vultures, the Viper's Nest was reputed to be a regular town, rich beyond legend with the accumulated loot of both countries funneling there to be squandered for the comforts it would buy.

Hendrix took the picture from the Judge and studied it. He shook his head. To suppose that such a woman . . . and yet there was no disputing the fact that she had posed wearing Slim Hendrix' gunbelt.

"There is such a place?" he asked slowly.

Harper nodded. "There is. I've known a man or two who'd admit having been there, but that's all they would say about it. Half a dozen lawmen have tried finding it. I've never heard of them since."

Hendrix got to his feet and shoved the picture in his pocket. There was obviously some significance to the picture or it wouldn't have been hidden in a cigar. He remembered the desperate lunge Chink Bostwick had made to get back the cigar, the squeaking fear in the barkeep's moaning.

YUCCA CITY was still raucously awake as Ray rode out. The darkness was stretched thin and still, a shifting uneasy sea of shadow and flat-planed moonlight that showed the Vultures looming cold and forbidding against the freckled sky. He skirted the road, pressing through the chaparral and heading deep into foothills that memory slowly made familiar.

Some time after midnight he reined in atop a brushy knoll that overhung the Bostwick Boxed B ranch buildings. No lights showed and he ghosted down, picking his way carefully through the thick brush. Leaving his mount tied in the blackness, he eased ahead on foot. The corral fence showed how many saddles were in town and how many were at the ranch. A dim light showed at the bunkhouse window and he circled it stealthily.

The main ranch house was low and sprawling, set against the hill slope. After a careful reconnoiter, Hendrix eased the door and stepped inside.

If he'd figured right, Bostwick was still in Yucca City with most of his crew, only an old timer or two staying behind to keep watch on the place.

Shielding matches in his cupped hands, Hendrix moved across the kitchen and into the next room. A desk stood with the roll top down and locked. A squat iron safe was in one corner, also locked. There was a small table with a lamp and several pictures. The match went out and Hendrix hurriedly struck another. He picked a picture from the table and held it close to the cupped match flame. It was the woman, the same saucy mouth and cool deep eyes, the same shapely shoulders and rounded form. Hendrix stared until the match burned his fingers.

A horse whinnied outside, close. A floor board creaked behind him. He started to whirl, and his head exploded into blackness.

Hendrix was lying on his back when he came to. A thumping ache beat against the side of his skull. Chink Bostwick was sitting on one edge of the table looking at a picture Hendrix recognized by its burned edge.

"He's awake, Chink," a rough voice said.

Rolling his head, Hendrix saw that a man stood over him with his own six-gun pointing at his head.

Bostwick walked over to Hendrix. He lashed out with his boot. Skin and flesh tore under the smashing impact. Hendrix tried to roll his head and ride the blow, but the shock went through him. The light whirled and wavered and then went out abruptly as Bostwick kicked again.

"Clever woman, my sister, Donna," the rancher's voice was bragging as Hendrix rose to the brim of consciousness again. Any lawman in the country could have this picture and he wouldn't know that she was telling me where Slim Hendrix is."

Bostwick kicked Hendrix's ribs again, but Hendrix knew better than to open his eyes.

"Kill the bucko, Pike," Bostwick snarled. "We'll head for the Nest tomorrow and fix Slim Hendrix's clock so he won't be talkin' about who killed Charley Bates.

Reckon by now Donna knows the where-'bouts of them greenbacks old Bates hid out." Bostwick laughed thinly. "She's got a way with men, Donna has.

"You want him beefed in here?"

"And get blood all over!" Bostwick's voice was outraged. "Drag him outside. Get a couple of the boys from the bunkhouse to help you dig."

Pike's fist fastened in Hendrix' shirt collar and dragged him across the floor.

"Find his horse and chouse it away from the Boxed B," Bostwick called. "We'll let 'em wonder what happened to this Hendrix too."

PIKE pushed through the door and dragged Hendrix out into the night. As they crossed the veranda, Hendrix reached up but he couldn't reach the gun holstered at Pike's side. Pike was still carrying Hendrix' gun.

They started down the veranda steps, and Hendrix grabbed one spur shank, jerking back with all his strength. The Boxed B man lost balance, yelled, and let go Hendrix' shirt collar. Pike went down rolling and Hendrix scooted into the shadow. Pike rolled to his knees and came up shooting.

One shot sent window glass clattering. Bostwick yelled from inside the house. Pike stopped shooting, and Hendrix scooted around the corner of the house like a scared coyote.

Boxed B waddies came piling out of the bunkhouse as Hendrix ducked into the brush behind the ranch house. Behind him, Bostwick was following orders and raking the hide off Pike Sorrell for letting Hendrix get away. Boxed B men fanned out and made a search of the barns and corrals. Hendrix reached his horse and quickly fumbled his extra six-gun out of his warbag. With the loaded gun in his fist he felt better.

"Five hundred dollars to the man who beefs that Hendrix!" Bostwick's yelling came to him.

A handful of men began working the brush above the ranch house. Hendrix swung astride his mount and the animal spooked, dancing aside, and breaking the night with the racket of popping brush. Instantly a hand yelled and sent half a dozen shots toward the sound.

Hendrix kicked his horse into flight. Other Bostwick men began firing at the sound of his flight. And then the brush and night safely swallowed him.

He swung south, moving fast, and after an hour pulled in for a breather. Not daring to show flame of a match, he rolled a cigarette and dry smoked while Bostwick riders raced by.

Ray Hendrix grinned. Chink Bostwick must be sweating blood or he would recognize the futility of trying to catch a man in the darkness of the hill country. Lifting the reins, Hendrix started working back upcountry toward the Boxed B. The next moves would be fast.

THREE men peeled away from the buildings and began a swift drive southward in the misty pre-dawn haze. There was no mistaking the hefty bulk of Bostwick, the lean slab-shouldered figure of Pike Sorrell. The third man Hendrix didn't know and he watched with mounting impatience, letting his mount drift along while the three came abreast and then forged ahead of the hillside where he lurked. It might well be a trap to draw him into the open . . . and it might be Bostwick riding fast to join his sister and to close the only mouth which could drape a hang-rope around his fat neck.

Keeping in cover, Hendrix tagged along. An hour's ride convinced him that Bostwick was headed for a definite goal.

The mountains closed them in. Great granite ridges humped saw-toothed spines into the sky and dwarfed the pygmies crawling across them. Stifling heat banked deep in the airless canyons of the Vultures. The sun slid behind the peaks to the west, and shadows bloated and swelled the canyons into shimmering blackness.

The very blackness saved his life. He was riding carefully, easing along the tortuous canyon bottoms with the clattering echo of Bostwick's riding to guide him. Hours had passed since they had forded the last water. Thirst was a burning knot tied in his throat. A broken stretch of talus rock made hard going. Hendrix dismounted and began leading his horse, picking his way blindly through the broken rock and splintered boulders.

A man loomed up suddenly from the shadows, a man afoot, and Hendrix threw himself aside as muzzle-flame poked at him.

Then Hendrix' own gun was gashing the night. The shadow wavered and melted downward. The thundering smash of gunfire rippled away.

Hendrix tossed a rock but there was no sound, no movement. He approached from the side until he could look down upon the sprawled figure. Hendrix nudged him with a boot toe. The man was dead. A few yards away a horse raised its head, then lay quiet, and Hendrix saw that the horse had broken a leg in scrambling through the talus. Bostwick hadn't waited.

The canyon was a narrow, twisting gash. There was no turning aside. It was either go ahead or backtrack, and Hendrix knew that Bostwick hadn't turned back.

Sometime after midnight the canyon split into four branches and he stopped. Until daylight revealed tracks he rested, wanting no part of blundering blindly into the wilds of the Vultures. Thirst gnawed like teeth in his throat, thirst that sucking a stone wouldn't alleviate, and he knew that his strength was running out.

Before the sun was noon-high the next day, Ray Hendrix was having trouble staying in the saddle. The heat waves twisted and danced across the sandy wash, thrown back by searing rock walls until his every breath was a torment. He rode slump-shouldered, forcing reddened eyes to seek out the shallow horse tracks in the sand. His mount shambled head down. Thrice he misjudged its lurching gait and fell.

It was that way when he began to realize that the horse was no longer walking. A single strand of barbed wire stretched across the canyon and he stared stupidly, unable to comprehend its meaning. He caught the scuff of boots on rock and laboriously raised his head. A man stood watching him, rifle in the sling of his arm.

"CHINK said you'd lost your horse," a voice said dimly. "He didn't figure . . . where'n hell is your canteen, man?"

Hendrix felt the hot metal ring touch his lips. He gasped and choked as tepid fluid rinsed his tongue and rolled into his throat. He drank again and saw that the rifle guard had lowered the wire. The guard grinned at the hungry way in which Hendrix mouthed the canteen.

"Not too much," he growled as Hendrix soaked his neckchief and gave it to his horse to chew.

Hendrix nodded. With a last pull at the canteen he rolled himself a smoke and started following the tracks. The guard was watching him, and Hendrix turned to wave briefly. Strength had come back somewhat, but his thirst quickly limed his mouth again.

The sun arched over and buried itself in the west and still there was no stopping, no prolonged rest, no water. Hendrix began to understand why no lawman had ever penetrated the labyrinth and why none had returned who had dared try.

Then gorge twisted abruptly and widened and *la Nidada de la Vibora* lay before him. A score or more of rude adobe huts and brush shacks lay scattered through the mesquite of the pocket. Cottonwood trees bespoke of water. Hendrix shoved forward.

Men eyed him as he rode into the worn trail. He had passed the trail guard, that was enough. And if not . . . he would never leave alive anyway. Cook fires smoked upward, cattle bawled, and somewhere in the outlaw kingdom a woman sang plaintively. Hendrix' mount veered suddenly and bolted toward a stone tank.

Hendrix rolled from the saddle and plunged his head into the water. He drank deep, drew back gasping, and buried his head again. When he finally looked up the light-headedness was gone. A tall, scar-faced man stood watching him.

"First time in, eh?" Scar-face said.

Hendrix nodded, fingers unconsciously drifting to his belt. The man saw the movement and his eyes showed amusement.

"Then Donna'll want to see you," the man said. "She'll fix you up with beans and tequila if you're fixed to pay for it."

Hendrix didn't answer and Scar-face shrugged. "There is no credit here, Amigo," he said. "If you had to cut and run without dinero, you'd better rassel up a friend to pay your way. It's expensive but it's safe. No lawman can ever touch you here.

"But don't get the idea that because Donna's a woman that you can ride high and mighty where she's concerned. Every frijole, every bean and drink of liquor is freighted in by Donna's mule packs. Them lads as tried bossin' her got awful sick of the belly ache." Scar-face grinned. "They

didn't get over it. Savvy?"

Hendrix savvied. Poison would be the common run of fate in this hell-hole where gun-swift and knife-savvy kept a man alive or left him dead. Life was worth less than the effort to end it.

The scar-faced hombre turned to walk away and Hendrix bent over the water.

"Hendrix!—by God!"

He came around whirling, throwing his gun in one swift convulsion. Pike Sorrell was already drawing, his gun coming clear and swinging up.

Hendrix triggered desperately. Pike's gun wavered and flared, and then the skinny gunman was rocking on his toes. His knees loosened. He went down.

Scar-face turned. "Bad, stranger," he said, carefully avoiding use of the name Sorrell had called. "You ain't set here yet. Don't go gunnin' anymore until you get cleared with Donna, savvy."

A few men lounged toward the tank, carefully curbing their curiosity. Hendrix reloaded and moved away.

MUSIC was coming from a long, two-storied adobe building; laughter too from brown-eyed wenches brought in from Sonora. Men swarmed through the swinging doors.

Hendrix watched from the shadows. The saloon-dance hall was the center of attraction; Donna would undoubtedly be running it. But Bostwick would be with her now.

He would have no chance in there now, Hendrix knew; the moment he breasted those doors his game would be up. One word from Bostwick would turn a score of guns against him. He circled the building.

A pepper tree slanted upward toward the veranda that circled the second story. It was a chance. He began the slow climb.

He crossed the veranda on tip-toe. A light showed and he eased up to the open window to peer in. For long moments he stared.

Slim Hendrix was in the room, in bed. Far from being a prisoner, the young waddy lay propped up on silken pillows, a gaudy, richly ornamented lamp close beside his shoulder. The very opulence of the room bespoke wealth and splendor, and the presence of a woman. Slim, his own kid brother, lolling like a king in this outlaw haven.

Ray eased into the room, his gun levelled at the figure on the bed.

"Don't yell, Slim," he warned, his voice chilled with hatred for a man who would betray a foster-father the way Slim Hendrix had done.

Slim eyed the unshaven figure covering him from the window. Then recognition dawned. "Ray! Ray! How'd you get here?"

Ray moved in closer. "I came trailing a murdering rat who hid under Charley Bates' love and trust and then betrayed him! I swore I'd settle for old Charley, but I never thought—"

Slim's mouth dropped open as the .45 in Ray's fist clicked back. He looked from the gun to the chilled glint in the eyes of his brother.

"I didn't do it, Ray," Slim barked out. "It was Bostwick. He shot Charley and laid me one alongside the head when I tried to jump him."

Ray didn't answer. His glance took in the splendor of the room with eloquent disdain. Nor did the .45 waver. He waited, and a strained pallor began creeping across Slim's features.

"I didn't, Ray, honest. We come up on Bostwick walkin' . . . claimed his horse throwed him. He got in the buckboard with us 'nd after a while he shot Charley. I come to when Bostwick and Sorrell was tryin' to drive the buckboard off Mile High Curve. I managed to get clear of the wagon just as it went over, and then I got knocked out again bumpin' down that drop. The next thing I knew a bunch of hard-cases was tryin' to pump out of me where Charley'd hid that roll of greenbacks. I guess I was wanderin' around out of my head and blabbed some about Charley bein' too smart to carry his roll in his pocket." When Ray still didn't believe, Sim added: "Charley hid that roll in a hollowed out place in the back axle of the buckboard, but I didn't tell them."

RAY HENDRIX' laugh was derisive. "And so they brought you to *la Nidada de la Vibora* and set you up like a king. Who's the queen in this stink hole, Bostwick's sister, Donna?"

Slim threw back the quilt. Ray saw

then that one arm was wrapped tight against his side. Pain drove deep clefts around Slim's mouth as he struggled to his feet.

"She's fed me and doctored me and kept those damned wolves from toastin' my toes over a camp fire to make me talk," he flared. "She's—" Slim stopped. "This isn't the Viper's Nest, is it?" he queried slowly. "Donna really isn't—"

Ray nodded, lowered his gun. Slim was taking an awful beating the way it was. The hurt in his face wasn't feigned, nor was his burning love for the woman who ruled this outlaw nest.

"Get your boots on," Ray ordered. "We'll try gettin' out of here."

Even while he was talking, bootsteps rapped along the hallway and a woman's low pitched laugh reached them. Slim stood motionless. Ray stepped back into the thick folds of the window drapes. It was too late to try getting Slim away now.

The door opened and Donna stood there, lips spread in a gay laugh. Her eyes shone, and Ray could realize how Slim had been taken in.

Then Bostwick was shoving past the woman. He laughed at the sick pallor on Slim's face as he stared at the woman.

"Your party's over, Hendrix," Bostwick gloated. "Donna has petted over you long enough. You wouldn't spill where you and old Bates hid that bank roll. But now you'll talk or I'll carve my initials in your hide inch by inch."

A glance sufficed to show the woman's sentiments. The dimpled smile had changed into a ruthless smirk as she withdrew a knife from her bodice and thrust the slender blade into the lamp. She watched the blade tip turn from red to whitish hot.

"This will loosen him up a little," she laughed. "Lay this against his bare belly and he'll howl like a wolf."

Slim started to say something but Bostwick backhanded him across the face. Slim fell onto the bed. Donna came at him with the glowing knife blade.

Ray quietly stepped into the room. The woman saw him first and she gave a shrill yip. Bostwick dropped flat to the floor on the far side of the bed. The woman's arm went back as she attempted to throw the knife. Slim slapped it out of her hand. Clawing and kicking, she threw herself into Slim, mouthing obscenities that would have shamed a wagon cook.

Bostwick shot across the bed, and Ray let his .45 speak. Gun-thunder rocked the room. The woman broke clear of Slim and leaped toward the door. She struggled to open it and Slim threw the fancy lamp. The lamp exploded in a licking swirl of flaming oil that drove her back. She whirled, teeth bared in a snarl, and launched herself against the crippled waddy. His one good arm couldn't quite handle her. She raked his face.

Ray crouched behind a marble-topped table and thrust fresh loads into his gun. From downstairs and from the street outside men were yelling. Lead whined from the hard surface of the table.

Peering around the bottom edge of the table, Hendrix saw the shadow of Bostwick under the bed. Flaming oil along the far side of the room limned the figure and Hendrix shot twice.

Bostwick screamed, lurched to his knees, hands clutching his midriff. He got to his feet and took a staggering step. The woman quit fighting then, and Slim backed away from her. For a moment both stood stunned, watching the dying man.

Donna's swearing was shrill and brutal as she reached for Bostwick. Ray grabbed Slim by the uninjured shoulder and dragged him across the room and out of the window. Smoke lay thick against the whole upper story of the building, shot with flame as the fire spread through the roof. He hoisted Slim to his back and leaped against the pepper tree. They shot downward and crumpled in a heap when they hit.

Slim was still lying there when Ray urged him to his feet and they staggered away.

Bucket lines formed as outlaws banded to combat the fire that was already beyond control. The two Hendrix brothers went unnoticed in the milling mob of men and scared, awed women. Slim stopped suddenly and turned.

"Donna," he said. "She's still up there with Bostwick. With that fire she'll never get out."

Ray looked at him steadily. "And if she does get out?"

While they stood facing each other over the question, the roof collapsed. Slim Hendrix turned away.

The Killer Packs A Lonely Gun

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

That wild Quarterman girl was giving him two-fifty per month to pack a ready six-gun. Jim Grant wasn't sure he'd be alive to collect the way Eight Q rannies were being dumped at her door.

THE FROTH-COATED piebald, with the girl crouched in the saddle, came roaring along the winding, narrow trail at full gallop. The girl's face was twisted in cold, pained anger. She fanned the piebald with an expensive, hand-tooled

Fearfully, Rilmaster's gunnies turned in their tracks.

quirt. Low brush walling the trail cracked with the speed of her passing. As twilight settled grayer, the girl checked in the reins an inch to shorten the piebald's stride.

The girl wore blue jeans with gleaming copper rivets and a plaid shirt, blue and black criss-crossed. Her reddish hair waved behind her head like a flamed twelve-inch pennant. The freckles on her cheeks were nearly drowned in the flush of hot blood rising tempestuously. Her squinty eyes were the color of gunsmoke, her lips a red grim line. Her bared throat pulsed with a heavy beat, and inside her youthful breast sounded raging, choked sobs.

She was snubbing the piebald tighter coming across the edge of town, kicking gray billows of dust high into the final streaks of sunlight angling down off Gun-down Range. With a twist of her agile body she veered the pony to a sudden, grating halt at the hitch-rail fronting the Union Dollar Bar. And with the same light motion she was dropping to the ground and blowing the fine clay dust away from her lips.

Jim Grant saw her break through the swing-doors with the rebellious attitude of

a wild Comanche. Her hair was in pleasant disarray and her face seemed to have the rare gift of beauty even while in a state of anger. The quirt in her short-fingered hand was slowly lashing the air. Jim Grant looked up and just about strangled on his half swallowed drink. He set the glass down on the bar and glanced around at other men, making the swift decision that this girl was certainly someone of great consequence, whether good or bad.

She stood glaring around, and kept lashing her quirt as though in quest of a target.

Outside the sun was gone. The interior of the Union Dollar Bar was sooty gray. Occupants numbered about twenty men at this early hour. Half a dozen were strung along the bar, another dozen grouped around tables inside the railed-off poker section in the rear. Two or three were dozing in chairs tilted back against one side wall.

Terry Quarterman flipped back her hair with a cat-like movement of her head. She moved three strides forward and halted, standing half on tiptoe with her eyes roving around the room and the lash end of the quirt whipping slowly to resemble the end of a feline tail.

One man after another passed under her sharp scrutiny. Jim Grant seemed cause for another glance, a second one which was merely curiosity because he was the only stranger present. Young Grant was conscious of the shrewd thoroughness of her stare and it left him half grinning and he again took up his glass, emptying it.

Terry Quarterman suddenly strode past the bar, toward the railed-off section in the rear. Men around the tables were already skidding back chairs as though capable of reading this striding girl's thoughts. Some seemed emboldened to wait as others drifted quietly away.

"Gabe!" Her voice went like a pistol crack through the room.

Lord A'mighty! Jim Grant thought. She's married to a drunk and she's gotta come and drag him home.

HE edged curiously along the bar, the glass still clutched in his calloused fingers. He was dressed in trail-dusty Levis and gray flannel shirt, a blue kerchief knotted at his throat. His white beaver Stetson was pretty filthy. He scaled an even six feet, and his wide shoulders might make you guess his weight at twenty pounds over his one seventy-eight.

Jim Grant had arrived in Coyote Glen less than an hour ago, so his curiosity was more on the imprudent side than cautious. He kept edging along the bar not wanting to miss a single thread of what seemed about to happen.

He watched her come to a halt in front of two men standing off to themselves.

The big man of the pair, thick biceps bulging, belt cutting into his heavy paunch, had a grin on his joweled face. His companion, sallow-cheeked from dissipation and pinch-shouldered from lack of work, stood scowling and sulking and, as Grant could see, was pretty drunk. About twenty-two or three years old, Jim figured.

"G'wan home, Terry!" he said, and snarled out a curse. "Beat it! I got business with Tate Rilmaster here."

"Rotten business if it's with Rilmaster!" she shot back, and she was looking straight at the big man.

Rilmaster merely shrugged indolently.

Terry reminded Jim of a game rooster spoiling for action. Her right fist, doubled around the quirt stock, kept the lash-end whipping suggestively.

Gabe lurched a step forward. "You keep your nose outa my concern, Terry!" he grumbled. "I'm legal owner of an eighth of the ranch and what I do with my share is my business." He glanced circumspectly at his large companion, and Rilmaster rocked back on his heels and nodded curtly. His eyes slid up and down the girl's trembling body.

"It's my business," she retorted, "if you plan to sell your holdings to a bushwacker like Tate Rilmaster! The agreement stipulates that you have to offer your share for sale to one of the family first."

Gabe's weak lips attempted a sneer. "They ain't nobody been able to produce that agreement for six, eight months now, best I c'n recollect." Again his glance solicited Rilmaster's support.

Rilmaster nodded his approbation and began picking his teeth with a match end. "Way I figger it, Miss Terry, is that if Gabe decides he'll take my handsome offer for his share of the Eight Q spread they

ain't a thing can be produced to stop the deal. You just as well kick in and be an agreeable partner . . ." He spat back across one shoulder, tugged at his belt, and ran his eyes across the girl.

"I'll see buzzards picking your bones before you get your hands on a share of the Eight Q holdings, Rilmaster! It's on your mind to buy out the rest of the outfit one by one and wind up with controlling interest. Your hide will leak like a sieve long before that time, Mister!"

Terry's half-brother, Gabe, lurched a wobbly step forward. He'd tanked up on a quart of Rilmaster's whiskey, and was in a nasty mood.

Jim Grant thought the business had begun to show symptoms of a classic tilt, and he edged farther along the bar. Grant had witnessed many a brawl, but nothing like this. His occupation required the territory bounded on the north by Canada, south by the Rio Grande, east by the Mississippi River, and the Pacific Ocean westward. He had visited all the boundaries of this domain except for the Pacific Ocean. Aspirations to this end had not waned, because at twenty-three he was still on his way. He was by occupation a fiddle-footed drifter. Now with a mounting curiosity that began to have the characteristic trait of personal interest, Grant watched this girl's half-brother twist his lips hatefully.

"G'wan outa here, Terry!" Gabe snarled. "It drives me loco to have a woman traipsin' after me sayin' what I can do and what I can't. Tate's my friend, and you've insulted him. I reckon you oughta apologize." He glanced swiftly back at Rilmaster, like a dog waiting a command. Rilmaster's head gave a slight nod. Emboldened now both by Rilmaster's grinning approbation and sound of his own words, Gabe suddenly lurched forward, grabbed one of Terry's arms, twisted it.

Wrenching savagely, Terry let out a tight squeal of rage, and shook loose from her half-brother. Gabe, cursing now, lurched after Terry and kicked out with his booted foot.

The quirt hissed over in an arc, lashing Gabe's shoulder with the splayed tip curling in to sting his throat. Gabe roared in pain and surprise, and began swinging blindly with his fists. But Terry, as though accustomed to and expecting rough-house tactics, nimbly dodged clear of the blows and came back whirling, sending the quirt again at Gabe while the room popped with the sound of rawhide stripping off skin.

The girl's fearlessness drew silent praise from Jim. Up to now she certainly was handling her end of the fracas with viciousness. But then Jim's blood chilled.

Tate Rilmaster sprinted up behind Terry and locked his huge arms around her, squeezing her to him. She squirmed and squealed and kicked back at his shins. Rilmaster was bear-hugging her body into his.

Jim moved in.

HE hadn't been invited to the ruckus, but all of a sudden he was angered as the big man kept pawing the girl and bellowing lustily while all the onlookers seemed either to be immensely enjoying the show, or afraid to interfere.

Jim Grant dug his fingertips into Rilmaster's shoulder and jerked. The big man threw up his arms and whirled, swinging.

Terry swayed off balance a moment and as Grant was ducking under the big man's roundhouse punch, she was back into the thick of the battle. With cat-like savagery she was laying the quirt end across Rilmaster's cheek.

A bellow of rage burst from Rilmaster. He lunged toward Terry. She met his charge straddle-footed, swinging her quirt. Rilmaster drew back a fist, then he caved back and Jim made a flying block that clipped the back of his knees. They went down in a squirming, clawing heap with Jim momentarily jack-knifed between Rilmaster's thick thighs.

Grant squirmed free and bounced nimbly to his feet. He feinted and then pivoted in with a looping right hook that turned Rilmaster's bearded face toward the ceiling.

Rilmaster was temporarily in a fog. Jim slid his left foot around to balance his weight, chopped in a left uppercut that thudded under Rilmaster's jaw.

The big man bent heavily to his hands and knees, and swayed drunkenly and shook his burly head with a monstrous effort to regain his sense. Finally, without attempting to rise, he canted his head and glared up at Jim Grant.

"A man oughta keep his fists off a lady," Grant said heavily.

"You're buttin' in here at a fancy cost, fella," Rilmaster managed.

Grant laughed half silently. "Mebbe I like it thataway."

Meanwhile, Terry Quarterman had composed herself somewhat and with a strained calm was straightening her plaid shirt and tossing back her rumpled hair. She stepped over and faced Grant.

"Thank you very much, Britt McGarry," she said.

Before Jim could recover from the surprise of being called Britt McGarry, he heard Rilmaster repeat the name hollowly. The big man flipped over on his quarters and stared fixedly at Grant.

"So the Great McGarry has brought his famous guns up this way?"

Grant's startled gaze swept to the girl. For the moment voices had stopped. And then behind him voices began muttering in a tone well intended to be polite. Terry's slash of a smile momentarily held Grant's objections in check.

"I wondered if you'd get my letter all right, McGarry," she said. "Was the salary all right—two-fifty a month?"

Jim Grant squinted down at Rilmaster and could not miss the swirl of fear bucking at the man's throat muscles. Jim nodded with a thin smile.

"Sure! The salary is fine, Miss Terry. Shall I start on this big bootlicker?"

With surprising quickness Rilmaster was on his feet and crab-walking backward. He removed a blue bandana kerchief from a hip pocket and began swiping at the blood trickling from his mouth.

"Don't pull your gun on me, McGarry," he said. "This place is full of my men. They'll kill you first move you make for a gun." His eyes shot around the room.

Jim laughed carelessly as he thought Britt McGarry might've done. He whirled to face the crowd. As far as he could tell every man jack of them furtively sought escape. He stepped over and jabbed a finger in Rilmaster's paunchy belly.

"Tuck in your bib, Rilmaster," he said. "I betcha they ain't a man here would set a hand against me if I up and blew out your brains. Personally, I gotta hunch you're just a tub of yellow taller."

Behind him, Grant heard the girl speaking. "We can ride out now if you're ready, McGarry."

He turned to face her. "Glad to."

He followed her out throught the swing doors.

They paced the plank walk in silence for half a block.

It was full night now, with half a moon glimmering above Three Peaks of the distant Gundown Range. A few wagons were pulling out for home, while incoming were punchers thirsting for an evening of fun at cards and liquor.

Finally she said, "I'm sorry I called you McGarry, but I did that for two reasons. In the first place, you walked blindly into a nice spot to get yourself killed. Rilmaster's gang hangs out at the Union Dollar Bar." She fell silent a moment while he heard breath hissing wearily through her teeth. "Secondly, it was my bluff. Maybe you've heard of Britt McGarry—he's quite a famous gun-hand who quarters around Kansas. I was just putting the bug in Rilmaster's hat that McGarry is on my payroll. You looked like a drifter to me and I figured maybe you were passing through to other parts. If Rilmaster's men thought you were McGarry, they'd think twice before hopping you. If Rilmaster himself believes that McGarry is actually on my payroll, he might keep off the Eight Q spread whether or not he ever saw McGarry—or you—again."

Her hands spread in a futile gesture. "I hope you're not mad at me for doing such a thing. It was the first thing that came to my mind. You can ride on through and as far as you're concerned. . . ." She shrugged and fell silent.

Jim Grant chuckled half to himself. "Don't apologize," he said. "I was butting in without an invite and I probably owe you a vote of thanks for saving my neck."

"Oh, I really appreciate what you did for me," Terry said. "It was a foolish idea for me to go in there in the first place. But I heard Rilmaster was getting my half-brother drunk, trying to persuade him to sell his eighth share of the ranch. That would give Rilmaster a toe hold . . . well, anyhow, please accept my thanks and take my advice and leave town as soon as you can since I've said you're Britt McGarry."

"For a fact," he acknowledged, "I was riding through. But now I'm half a mind to hold you to that offer. . . ." He ended off smiling.

Terry halted a pace ahead, turning. "I just said that as part of my bluff."

"Oh! Then you didn't mean it. You don't need help."

Baffled momentarily, her eyes shifted along the plank walk and back, then was eyeing him with quiet interest.

"Wait a minute!" she whispered. "Sometimes a spur-of-the-moment bluff can turn into possibilities. Is that what you're getting at? Or maybe you have committed some horrible deed and want to commit suicide and haven't the nerve. Or—you could be a gunhawk out of work. That could be it! Or it's just possible you think this is a rope-and-saddle contest where you could earn some easy grub money. I'll warn you now, Mister, these fellows aren't carrying bean-shooters around in their pockets. This is a man's fight and—" She looked up and down his long-muscled frame. "Well, you do look like a man. If you want to ride out with me, we'll talk it over."

Jim Grant nodded slowly, looked at Terry Quarterman with deep appreciation, and touched his hat brim.

"Time's passing, ma'am," he said. "I'm called Jim."

II

THERE was something different about this girl's voice, her way of throwing up a rock-hard and vicious offense and fighting blindly from behind nervous fear; different, Jim Grant concluded, than most of the women he'd had the good and bad fortune to encounter along the trail towns.

The stars now were showing with the boldness of silver conchas glimmering in yellow lamplight, and the yellowness was a huge, orange-tinted moon pushing its way up from behind the mountains. Off in the distance a coyote yapped.

Jim twisted up a smoke as they cantered from town. He got a match from his shirt pocket and slid it along the fender of his saddle. Holding the match in cupped palms, its glare iluminated a blunt nose and a longish face prickled with a day's growth of beard and a pair of clear, thought-twinkling gray eyes. His long jawline squared abruptly into a resolute chin, and above the chin full lips clamped the cigarette tight while twin streams of smoke poured out his nostrils. He was deep-chested and narrow-hipped, and the hair coming down from the dust-caked Stetson had been too long away from a barber or, as was often the case, the shears of an itinerant sheep shearer.

He thought back over the past hour and came up with an unsparing respect for this girl. He finally canted half around in his seat. "A man oughta know who he's working for."

"I'm Teresa Quarterman. Most folks call me Terry."

"Okay, Terry, and I'm Jim Grant. The Great McGarry." He chuckled a moment. "I kinda like the name at that—'specially the Great part of it."

She watched his grin break wide and amused in the starshine.

"I've pinned a target on you; I guess you realize that."

He shrugged, jabbed at his Stetson with a curved thumb.

"Terry, if the pay is two-fifty a month, you can pin another target on my back."

"That's where I pinned the target, Jim Grant."

He inhaled smoke. "So that's the type of brethren this here land is full of!" He grunted in a half satisfied way; he squinted across at Terry. "Well, what's the job all about? Two-fifty is a stiff wage, and maybe I won't ask that much. The size of the wage says it's gun work. Gun fighting ain't exactly my line."

She was staring ahead, chin down-tilted in hard pride. And Grant sensed that though she'd fought as best she could, violence or perhaps the threat of violence had suddenly wearied her.

"Our brand is the Eight Q," she finally told him. "I have five half-brothers who each own one eighth, and I own three eighths. My father died two years ago, and that's the way his will divided the property. But there was a separate agreement we all signed that was not mentioned in the will itself. This agreement stipulated that each partner must offer his share to other partners before selling to an outsider. My copy of that agreement vanished from my safe at home."

"What's the dope on Rilmaster?"

"Tate Rilmaster owns the spread directly north of us. But his range is poorly and he'd like to buy into the Eight Q so he

could range his beef down on our sections. Rilmaster has slowly built himself into a power. It's pretty well known he's done some rustling to build up his place, but no one can—or has the nerve—to attempt prosecution. If he ever gets a toehold in the Eight Q, I'm afraid of what will follow." She glanced at Jim and sighed.

"And so Rilmaster is working on your half-brother, Gabe, trying to buy him out. What's wrong with the rest of your half-brothers?"

She laughed softly, but bitterness was etched deep in the sound, and for a moment thereafter she was silent and pensive.

"If anything, they're a worse lot than Gabe. Alf and Jarg, the two oldest, run with Rilmaster and his gang and would probably like to see me sell out. Durk and Lee keep to themselves a lot, and both drink and gamble heavily. It may be Rilmaster has loaned them money. If Rilmaster is eventually able to buy them out he'd own five eighths of the spread and control the say-so. He could squeeze me out then at his own price."

Jim Grant lifted his eyelids. "Then I, alias the Great McGarry, am supposed to put cactus under Rilmaster's saddle."

She laughed half wickedly alongside him.

"I don't blame you for thinking it over," she commented, now serious. "As I explained before, I was jumping at straws when I called you McGarry in the Union Dollar Bar, You'll probably decide to drift, and I'm not going to attempt to argue you out of it." There were chunks of grimness in her voice as she resumed. "The two-fifty wage stands—take it or leave it!"

She threw it at him like a challenge, and Jim Grant realized that impulsiveness was a characteristic trait of this girl. But a wry thought came clear to him; she's a little dandy when it comes to baiting a man with his own pride. She had the half frantic air of one on the slippery edge of defeat, and yet there was no forgetting the hellion-like temper that could drive her fighting and squawling at super odds. Cautiousness made him remember that there was ingrained in most females a desire that can end only in burning exultation when she triumphs over a member of the opposite sex, be it in honest battle, hate, or tender love.

He drew out his decision but held it in check as, from long habit, he again sorted and weighed all the facts.

They cantered off the flat and onto an incline trail brush-fringed and steeple-walled with rustling pine. He waited further, and was slowly convinced that Terry Quarterman was well-schooled in bartering; she recognized the fact when she'd tossed in a hard point to dispute, and was content to let it lay. For this he further admired her.

His blunt voice finally said, "I'll take it! Do I put up at your place? Or do I dash in and out like a ghost gunman?"

"You can put up in the bunkhouse with the boys," she told him.

"And what's the general program?" he asked.

"Why not let Rilmaster tip his hand?"

He nodded slowly, approving her shrewdness.

THEY topped the first rise and picked up a wagon road on the other side that coursed the river for a mile, then angled off on its own into steeper territory that marked the beginning of the Gundown Range.

Terry explained that the river was the eastern boundary of the Eight Q spread. He learned, further, that some eight-odd thousand head of beef wore the Eight Q iron, whereas not so long ago the count reached nearly twelve thousand. It occurred to him that Rilmaster was not only attempting to edge in with a legal purchase, he had done so illegally by the very fact of the cattle count. The Eight Q was a nice pot to move in on, especially at a cheap price.

Jim Grant stretched in his saddle, feeling the welcome heat that comes to a man who is riding the crusty edge of a trouble-cauldron. And then his body twitched with alertness as from some higher area there sounded the faint scuff of a shod hoof on rock.

"Shod horses on the range?" he asked.

She nodded. "We have a couple hundred head of horses. Most of them are kept shod."

He twisted up a smoke and struck a match, holding it in his cupped hands.

A .30-30 bullet whined ominously near, and a shower of clipped spruce ends

sprayed over his ducking head. The sharp-edged, long drawn echo of a rifle cracked the upper stillness.

He dropped the match, hearing Terry swearing mildly beside him, and he jerked aside dodging then grabbed at his saddle carbine that jutted out of the boot under his right leg. He had set the target with that match. He reached up and pinched out the fire on the end of his cigarette between thumb and forefinger. Another .30-30 bullet came down searching for them and thudded into a tree nearby.

"Hold it!" he cautioned Terry. "This ain't accidental shooting. They'll probably figure we're on the move by now. Just stand ground and wait." True to his prediction a flood of shots screamed downward. A few feet ahead a slug worried into the rocky trail, and Grant's horse shied and reared back on its heels as rock dust bit at its face and chest.

"Pull ahead up trail!" Grant ordered. "I got a hunch someone is trying to eliminate future trouble."

They moved forward a few paces, and the shooting ranged behind them for ten seconds, then chopped off into silence.

"We better go back about a hundred yards," Terry said. "We passed a fork back there which circles and comes into this main trail again about a half mile higher."

"Better get your rifle ready just in case they try to rush us," he said. "Though I doubt they'll be that brave."

He followed Terry back down slope. Another shot sounded, and the thud of it was behind. They made the fork without mishap.

"You wait here," he said. "I'll take a pasear up this fork and see what I can find."

Without waiting for a reply, he heeled his horse away. A shot blasted from the high level, and he drew rein, worried about Terry. But there was no sound from her direction, and as he angled up the fork he kept his rifle at the ready.

Again rifle fire crackled into the darkness, and as two spaced shots banged out from the area where he'd left Terry, Grant hesitated. Suddenly he was nodding. He knew Terry had gone to work with her rifle and he understood her strategy. She'd hold them at bay while he flanked them. In reply to Terry's gunfire, nine came rumbling off the high slope, each chopping into the echo of its predecessor. He was glad she was pulling them out. It told him there was a cluster of bushwackers up there. He pressed his wishbone against the horn and urged his mount to greater speed.

For three minutes now there had been silence, then impatience made those above send down another cannonading. Jim Grant reined in and curled his finger around the carbine trigger, hot anger narrowing his attention on the wicked flicks of gun flame he now could see stabbing at darkness about a hundred feet dead ahead. He was nearly at the intersection of the trails.

HE raised his rifle and shot six times, laying them five feet apart and at the same level. Common sense made him rowel his horse and send it into a trail-side gap. He wormed deeper into the brushy enclosure. And the spot from which he'd just moved became a solid, sparkling geyser of spurting rock-chip and dust.

There were more enemies up there, apparently, than he had first estimated. Perhaps as many as eight or ten, judging by the volume of gunfire.

Jim Grant edged his horse slowly around and craned his neck out and uttered a pained grunt, stringing it out and injecting into it the sound of a wounded wailing.

A wicked yelp of glee came down at him. But whoever it was up there was no fool. Another round of shots screamed down, ranging expertly back and forth like a deadly scythe.

This time Jim let loose a pinched scream, wavering the end to an inhuman gasp. Somebody up there lost patience and a horse came lunging down. Grant crammed the carbine stock against his shoulder, waited.

A horse snorted and its rider wheezed in tight alarm. Grant's rifle nosed up. A figure on horseback round a curve and Grant shot him out of the saddle. Then he pulled his horse deeper into the protective gap and cocked an ear.

He thought he heard a break up there, as though someone were charging down.

Now he vaulted from the saddle and ran crouched into the open. He still had that spot up there indexed in his mind. He dropped to one knee and sent up a bait shot. He leaped aside a few feet, and the ex-

pected answer came. He chopped that answer in half with one quick blast. That was two of them.

That seemed to be enough. He heard the rattling of hoofs on rock, and from the sounds he knew they were headed for higher ground. He emptied his rifle on their tail, then bounded back into the gap, reloading. Finally he crawled on his horse and headed back down the fork trail.

Coming into the main trail, he sang out: "I'm coming in! It's me—that man, the Great McGarry!"

She came out afoot to meet him.

"Complete rout," he said laughingly. "I got a pair of them. Can't say whether they was winged or killed, We better take a different route to your place, if there is one. They're probably licking their wounds and are in a bad mood. They may form an ambush farther long this trail. I doubt if we'd have an open chance like this again."

"It's a long detour," she told him. "We'll have to go back as far as the river." Her voice winked out dryly. "You savvy now what I meant when I said I'd pinned a target on your back."

"Well, we've got one thing firmly established," he said. "They're out to get me and apparently they wouldn't mind sending you the same route." They faced each other half hesitantly. "You did right proud of yourself down here," he commented.

"I tried to hold their attention while you flanked them."

"Which you did," he agreed. "I s'pose there's little doubt it was one of Rilmaster's moves."

"It certainly was his methods," she admitted. "We better get moving. They could circle back."

III

JIM GRANT did a lot of thoughtful talking to himself as he trailed behind Terry Quarterman. The first thing he realized was that he was going to earn that two-fifty the hard way, with no guarantee that he'd be alive on payday to collect. He didn't waste time measuring the extent of Rilmaster's treachery. It was a bag full, and all wool, no mistake. There was no difficult arithmetic to solve, either. This had its questionable advantages. It made Grant know, without graying his brain, exactly where he stood—with his wishbone breasting a rifle bore. But, he had asked for it! He had actually egged Terry into hiring him when, as a matter of fact, it was not her original intention at all.

In an hour they were cruising the river bank, with the swift deep water sending its music far into the night. Terry led the way across a circuitous trail that ascended and finally broke onto a high, narrow rim. Another two hours and they were in a sweeping valley with moon-drenched vistas arching dimly in tricky distances. As they approached the Eight Q headquarters, Jim saw no lights.

Terry led the way inside a high-roofed stable. As they stripped gear from their mounts, Grant heard horses tramping nervously in other stalls. Out of curiosity, he stepped into one of the stalls and ran a hand along one horse's back.

"Hullo!" he said in a tight voice.

She walked toward him. "What is it?"

"This horse is hot," he said. "Hasn't been outa the saddle many minutes."

Terry strode alongside him, and he heard her gasp.

"Let's examine some of the others," she suggested. "This is Lee's horse." She turned quickly.

In the next stall the horse shifted sleepily. It's back was dry.

"That was Alf's horse," Terry murmured.

The next horse was pawing nervously at the cups in the earth floor and jerking nervously at the halter rope. Grant's palm came away coated with a scum of horse sweat.

He grunted sourly. "Whose horse is this one?"

"Jarg's," she admitted, tight-lipped. "They've been out and I didn't see them in town."

"It looks like Rilmaster has already progressed farther than you suspect, Terry. It's two-to-one he's already got your half-brothers primed against you. You say he's got poor grass on his range; with winter coming on he's probably getting doubly anxious to cross his herd over to Eight Q territory."

"Then you think it may have been my half-brothers up there shooting at us?"

"Could be the deal. Rilmaster knows that once he gets a foot inside the Eight

Q door, he's set. Looks like when you called me McGarry it was the signal to touch off the fuse. Rilmaster was content to work under cover until he figured you were calling in outside help. He's got to work fast, now; looks like you made the deadline back in the saloon."

Terry paced nervously around in the darkened stable.

Jim wondered just how much longer she'd be able to hold her nerve.

She said, "I wish I knew for certain. These horses certainly haven't been unsaddled many minutes. But that doesn't prove it was my half-brothers who waylaid us."

Grant did not venture an answer right away.

But he wondered vaguely if Terry Quarterman was coming to the defense of her shirttail kin. Because if she had any ideas along those lines, he just wasn't her man, not even at five times two-fifty. If these five half-brothers had turned into gunhawks for Tate Rilmaster, there was one way to find out!

He said, "S'pose I take a look-see at their rifles. Maybe they've been fired in the last few hours, maybe not."

Terry shrugged cryptically. "Even if they were fired, they may have already been cleaned."

"They'll either smell of gun smoke or gun oil, in either case," he said, waiting.

"They all sleep in the bunkhouse located behind the main house. I live in the main house."

"I'm s'posed to sleep in the bunkhouse. You tag along to bed. I'll take a look at their rifles."

"Well. . . ."

He glanced at her sharply. "The time to back out of this deal between you and me—if you wanna—is right now, Terry."

"No," she said quietly. "It's just that I'm suddenly facing something I didn't want to happen. There is no love lost between myself and my half-brothers. Matter of fact, they hate me because father left me three eighths of the ranch."

"It's too late for peace, then."

She nodded. "Of course, you're right. But there are two things I don't like about this deal. I don't like hiring a gunman. And . . . it sounds silly, Jim . . . but I don't like you being a gunman." She took a

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swift breath, turned on her heel and sped from the stables.

JIM made no attempt to follow Terry. He saw her silhouette pass through the stable arch and disappear. He stood a moment in moody thought, then tramped slowly into the open.

The moon had heeled over Gundown Range, and a chill was creeping into the air. This girl has got a peculiar stubbornness, he thought.

For a few moments he stood in the open getting his bearings. He saw the two-story rock house sixty yards away. Beyond that was a low, one-story structure which he assumed was the bunkhouse Terry had mentioned. He walked that way, eyes covertly scanning the area.

Now his hand was on the carved wooden latch of the oak bunkhouse door. He stopped, tense with an inborn caution about going blindly inside strange places. He shook himself and rammed a shoulder at the door and tromped noisily inside.

He was certain his entrance was noisy enough to arouse any man sleeping inside. His fingers eased his six-gun free, and he let it dangle. There was no one stirring, but he did catch the sound of heavy breathing. In the half light he saw a row of double bunks stretching down either side of the room.

He struck a match and reflected its flare in cupped hands, ready at the first rebellious movement to snuff out the light. On each side of the room were four double bunks. In each lower bunk on his right was a figure rolled in blankets.

Silence pinched at his nerves. Leaning against the foot of the near bunk was a heavy-stocked .30-30 carbine. With a quick breath he snuffed out the match and stepped over and yanked up the rifle. The bore reeked of freshly burnt powder. He clenched it a moment club-like and glared balefully down at the man in the bunk. He decided the man was feigning sleep.

He was jubilant with the discovery and yet wanted to laugh out in comical rage because he could be certain these shirt-tail kin of Terry's were eyeing him in the darkness. They were guilty as hell! Jim Grant had proved it. And they, by the same token, knew he was aware of it. But against Grant's surge of hysterical mirth beat a hard tide of warning. The slow pulse of breath in the room held sinister possibilities.

And suddenly he was vastly content with this false identity of his that pegged him as a notorious gunny.

He replaced the rifle, and struck another match.

On the post supporting the roof ridge was a lamp suspended on an anvil forged bracket. He stepped over and eased up the sooty chimney and slid the match along the circular wick. It took fire and he worked the chimney down. In the yellow lamplight he glared around at these men who as yet would not openly admit his presence.

Jim stepped over to the first bunk and jerked at the blanket.

A pair of startled, bleary eyes stared morosely at him. Alf Quarterman had a short, crooked jawline and the right nostril of his nose had a knife slit that had never healed. The right eye was dim, a lusterless, marble-hard black, and the left side of his face formed all his expressions to give his features a hideous and incredulous duality. His bony shoulders, clad in a faded blue wool shirt, lifted from the bunk a few inches.

"Who're you?" Alf asked bluntly.

It was then that Jim discovered that no pants, boots or gunbelts were anywhere in sight. Which meant they were all fully dressed beneath blankets.

"I'm the rabbit that was pot-shotted at a while ago," Grant said. "You were out rabbit hunting tonight, huh?"

Alf gulped brokenly, and half of his face twisted in fear. He jerked upright now, yelling: "Jay . . . Durk . . . Lee!"

Jay Quarterman stirred in the next bunk, then popped up on one elbow. An inch of beard covered his long face, and slit eyes tried to feign sleepiness.

"What's up, Alf?" Jay muttered. "Hey, Whozat?" He stared owlishly at Grant. "Durk! Lee!" he yelled out. "We got company!"

Durk and Lee Quarterman swung out of their blankets and clomped booted feet on the floor. They twisted around to peer at Grant. These were big men. Each weighed well over two hundred.

Jim settled back on his heels, grinning, waiting.

LEE Quarterman lurched lazily on his feet, stretched and yawned and walked toward Jim.

"Mister," he snarled, "we is a very hospitable family . . . but, by hell, what're you doin' bustin' in to disturb a workin' man's sleep?"

Jay and Alf came off their bunks and scowled at the intruder.

"You got some gall hornin' yore way in here!" Alf complained. His nervous eyes shifted to Grant's holstered gun.

Meanwhile, Durk had sauntered over to casually take up a position by the doorway. He leaned indolently back against the wall, crossing his thick arms.

Smiling faintly, Grant drawled, "I'm just a hired hand of this here Eight Q outfit, boys. Just lookin' for a bunk to flop my weary bones down on. Name's McGarry."

"Well, well," Lee said. "Why didn't you say so. I guess Terry hired you."

Grant nodded. "We just rode in. Would-a been here sooner but we run into some boys rabbit huntin'." He laughed. Lee responded with a wheezy chuckle.

"Hills are chock full of rabbits this time of night," Lee admitted, twisting up a smoke. He nodded at the row of empty bunks. "Just grab any bunk you like, McGarry." He stifled a yawn and turned to his brothers. "We better get some sleep, fellas. Got a hard day on the range tomorrow."

Grant's dry tongue licked at his lips. If he sensed danger, his eyes gave no indication of it and his movements were leisurely. He drawled, "Hope you men don't snore too loud—I'm a awful light sleeper."

He doused the light and sat on the edge of the bunk nearest the entrance. Voices had stopped and the place was deathly still.

Finally Jim Grant eased off a boot and dropped it. Then the other. He slid under the blanket fully clothed, and gunned, then warily inched one hand toward his boots and dragged them beneath the blanket and shoved his feet inside. He lay there tensed and ready for anything. He heard the others squirming in their bunks.

But nothing happened.

He squirmed fretfully as an hour passed and finally dozed off sensing the hard knot of his gun boring into his thigh.

And then hell busted loose in his dreams.

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A pair of knees sunk into his stomach with pile-driver force and he lashed out with both feet striking air. He came out of it pawing and slashing with both fists. He was gasping for breath under a stinking, smothering blanket. Someone was twisting the blanket around his head and he was unable to fight it off.

He was half gagged by the filthy reek of the blanket. Knees bored murderously into his groin. He got one hand free, clawed out with it and entangled his fingers in matted hair.

He yanked and the tension of the blanket weakened. He recoiled and shot upward with an explosive grunt. He thudded his fist into bared teeth. A voice garbled out in pain. Jim lurched sidewise off the bunk.

They came at him swinging clubbed rifles. He stiff-armed a charging figure, hooked with his other fist. Blood splattered across his face and a man grunted.

"Stand back, fellas . . ." a voice panted. "Clear away—I'm gonna gun-gut the son. . . ."

Grant charged in to clinch with one of them, hanging on and swinging the figure off balance. They went round and round.

They finally upset and went down bucking and swinging, and by this man's size Grant figured it must be Lee. He drove his fist into his face.

Then he felt the long cold steel of a gun barrel laying against the side of his skull. He ducked half groggily, and the stock of a rifle knocked him cold.

He wobbled his head back and forth and tasted the salt of fresh blood on his tongue. Coming now into the slippery realms of semi-consciousness, a sick and dizzy feeling punched at him with his torn flesh stinging as drying blood began to pinch at open wounds.

He had some silly thoughts about drawing two-fifty per, a pretty, red-head gal squeezing soft lips against his, and the damaged reputation of a gun-slinger named Britt McGarry.

It required a couple minutes of concentration to decide he was belly down on a horse's back, with feet lashed to wrists below. His chin bounced painfully against the horse's heaving ribs. His chest was a mass of pain. There was also that spasm of hope that in a dying man flicks off and on and has no more true strength than a candle flame in a wind storm.

And suddenly the motion of the horse ceased. There was a great sloshing sound drumming in Grant's ears.

"It's a shame to give this critter a bath before Saturday night," a voice said.

The remark brought a guffaw of mirth from his captors.

They pulled him off the horse, and the crooked face of Alf Quarterman bent over him.

"I just wonder," Alf mused, "you don't think mebbe they's a reward of any kind for this McGarry?"

Lee Quarterman grunted. "We'll look that up later, Alf," he said. "If they is we can fish him out later with a grapple hook."

Jim fought, but there was no movement. He cursed and screamed and bellowed, but there was no sound. There was only visionary scenes traveling ever faster and faster inside his skull. One town after another, one lonely trail blurring into the next, one year crashing upon the tail of the last; faces of enemies, friends, and strangers, grinning, guffawing, crying, but not helping. It was the hunger of past enjoyments lapping up the few remaining crumbs of life.

IV

THE QUARTERMAN BOYS pitched him high and far, and as his body splashed and plunged below the swift surface water the fellows on the bank sent derisive laughs after him.

They didn't see him for long, because darkness swallowed his threshing figure as the current sped him downstream and around a rocky bend. They mounted and headed home, satisfied they'd put a pretty feather in their greasy Stetsons.

It was a new kind of battle for Jim Grant.

When you are accustomed to punching with your arms and suddenly they will not move, it can have a strange, overpowering effect on your sanity; Grant's arms were thonged at the wrists to his belt behind him. There was no kicking anything solid with boot and knee. There was, for a fact, no more shifty opponent than water. Punch it full of holes, and the holes instantly gush full again. It was

swift, elusive; but two factors of nature were on Grant's side.

First, the chillness of the water was a swift balm to his groping senses. Secondly, the incredible power of the waters' swift downward flight carried him high, as it might carry a cork or a blob of dead flotsam.

With a frantic motion of his body, Jim managed to keep his face uppermost, gulping in a breath each time he felt the tide roll away from his mouth.

His long figure doubled and shot straight. He whirled over and over, gulping air. He jerked one foot, then the other. The rawhide binding his ankles gave a fraction, and inside his right boot the heel worked nearly free. It seemed to him that he had hours on end to ponder the fact that his right heel was slipping out of his boot.

And suddenly the foot was free, his soggy sock draped over his half numbed toes. He had two legs now, and they wish-boned out with the swift driving motions of a bullfrog.

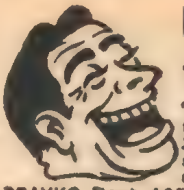
But it was better than that. One foot went down gropingly and rammed into a rock. Momentarily he was upended, his body protruding and jerking back and forth like a sodden log.

The vision of a crazy loop hovered over him for a broken second. The raw brush of hemp keened him once more. The current battered at his back side, and his foot eventually skidded off the rock. He gulped in air as again his body plummeted forward and down.

Then there was a jerking, cutting impact that tossed him high and leveled him back against the water. The current battered at him and a thong-like thing was tightening around him at the elbows.

He was being forcibly dragged into shallow water. He knew now it was a reata. And as his hopes had pinnacled but a moment beforehand, they now crashed into oblivion. He was dragged roughly along the rocky shoreline a few feet, and then the reata slackened and he was leapfrogging to get on his feet.

Of course it was the Quarterman boys dragging him out for another try at death! The thought hit him with a miserable thud.



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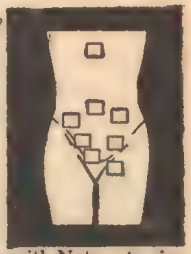
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HE managed to get to his feet as a figure emerged from the gloom. He debated whether to start kicking now, or wait for a nearer target. He decided upon the latter, and he waited scarcely realizing he hadn't the strength to lift a finger.

"Jim Grant!" a woman's frightened voice called out.

The last ounce of strength leaked out of Jim. He caved abruptly at the knees.

She dropped down beside him. "It's my fault," she said. "All my fault, Jim!"

"You?" he said, and he made a silly grin.

For the next few moments, both were inarticulate. Terry did no more than gaze at him, shaking her head bewilderedly. And then chill struck him and his teeth chattered.

"We've got to get back from the river where we can build a fire," Terry said. "Can you walk?"

"I dunno," he said. "If you'll unhook my hands from behind me..." He twisted around and she loosened the knots. She helped him to his feet, where he swayed drunkenly. He glanced down, lifting one foot. "Seems like I lost a boot in the

"Wait here," Terry said. "I'll bring my horse down."

Terry brought the horse alongside him. "See if you can get in the saddle. I'll give you a push."

Where we going?" he asked.

"Back from the river. I can find a ravine where we can make a fire and dry you out. I don't think they'll come back. But we should hurry."

There was fright in her voice.

"Up," she urged. "Hurry."

He stabbed at the stirrup with his foot. With Terry shoving he managed to gain the hull.

"Hang on," Terry said.

They coursed a trail leading to higher ground. Cattle shifted in the brush about them. They were in meadowland now, on a slope toward Gundown peaks, and they could see nothing beyond except more peaks and the faint light in the sky that was approaching dawn.

A thirty minute trek brought them against the maw of a steeple-walled, tree-choked gorge.

"Here," Terry said. "This will be good."

Jim slid down and stood shivering. Terry dropped the reins and rummaged a few small sticks while he opened his knife and sliced some pitch bark off a pine tree. In a few moments they had a fire crackling.

HE squatted down, facing the flame and spreading his palms against it.

"I guess I didn't make a very good start," Jim said.

Terry said, "On the contrary. Now they think you're dead."

"Yes. I guess so. But how did you manage. . . ."

Terry was squatted across the fire from him. She wore Levis and a heavy mackinaw jacket. She said matter-of-factly, "I knew what to expect more than you did. Don't think I was using you as bait to prove a point. But after I was in the house I got to thinking about things. I went out the back door and saw you going in the bunkhouse. I heard the fight, then saw them carry you out. When they left, I followed at a distance."

"And," he said, grinning, "arrived in the nick of time to save my neck from the coils of the villain." He shook his head. "That's about as close as I ever want to come. So now what?"

"I think it's a useless fight," she said in a flat voice.

He reached out with his one booted foot and kicked an ember back in the fire. He started to pat his pocket for the makings, then foolishly dropped his hands.

"Ruined my tobacco," he said.

"I've got some," Terry told him. From her shirt pocket she pulled a sack of Durham and papers. "Want me to roll it for you?"

He squinted down at his fingers, which were still shaky.

"Be a help," he admitted.

He watched her inexpertly twist up a smoke.

"I thought maybe you had the habit, too," he drawled. "But you don't do so good at it."

She shook her head, sliding her tongue along the seam of the cigarette. "Just carry some along for wayfarers," she said.

He got up and stepped around and took the cigarette. He lighted it with an ember and stood there burning it up in three great drags. He tossed it back in the fire, blow-

ing streams of smoke from his nostrils.

"What makes you think it's a useless fight?" he said.

She shrugged. "You and I—" She shrugged again.

"I'm a little stubborn when it comes to yelling quits," he told her.

"No use being stubborn about the thing," Terry said. "It looks like killing is the only solution, and. . . ."

"Then that's the answer."

"We'd have Rilmaster's bunch besides my half-brothers to whip."

"That all depends," Grant said.

She laughed bitterly. "It might be cheaper if you and I just left it all to them."

He stared at her now. "I like the you and I part of it, Terry. But not the leaving of everything to that bunch of buzzards. No, there's a way—if you want to whip a pack of coyotes you got to throw a juicy bone among them."

"And how?"

He looked down at his feet.

"To answer that one, I need a pair of boots and a rifle and some ammunition. And wire clippers."

Terry frowned perplexedly. "Well, that part doesn't sound impossible."

"And food," he added hungrily.

"We can get everything except the boots from one of our line camps," Terry said. "We are about five miles from the nearest line camp shack."

"Could I lay in there safely until you could maybe rustle me a pair of boots, size ten and a half?"

"The line camp shacks aren't used until winter. You'd be safe there, all right."

"Then we're losing time," Grant said.

THEY made the line camp shack in a matter of two hours. It was no more than a dugout with a log front, but inside was a bunk with blankets and a makeshift cupboard filled with tinned food.

He opened a can of beans and wolfed it down. He told Terry he'd get a few hours sleep until she got back. She stood a moment facing him. Her expression took on a strange confusion, and momentarily she tried to evade his eyes. And then, as if he'd spoken some word, she threw herself against him.

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Jim lifted his arms and put them around Terry, then he held her back, saying, "You're not kidding me?"

She shook her head. "I never spoof about things like this, Jim."

He bent his head down, pressing his lips against hers.

"You're committing yourself," he told her.

She nodded and backed away. "I know." Worry made a frown of her face. "Once more, Jim—I'm willing to give it all to them."

Jim shook his head stubbornly. "That ain't the way I learned to play."

She was gone then, and he tried to sleep, but he couldn't stop thinking. Then exhaustion made him sleep for a short spell, and he was awake again, thinking. He got off the bunk and picked a rifle from the rack on the wall and examined it. He found a can of gun oil, cleaned the rifle, and made certain the cartridge chamber was full. He crammed his pockets with shells. He got up and walked to a spring behind the cabin and doused his face in cold water. He stood leaning against the small pole horse corral, waiting.

Terry got back by mid-afternoon. Her face was flushed with excitement. Jim stepped out to meet her, and he took her hand as she came off the saddle.

"Gabe was one of them you killed up there on the trail!" she told him. "They were in on it!"

Jim glanced at the bundle lashed behind her saddle.

"Did you manage to get me some boots?"

"Yes. The boys were all roaring drunk. I found an extra pair in the bunkhouse. I think they're an old pair of Lee's. He's pretty big, and his boots should be large enough for you."

"Best I can recollect of Lee," Jim said wryly, "his boots will be plenty big for me." He removed the bundle and unwrapped it. There was ample room in the boots for his feet, but extra room was better than a boot that pinched. "Now—you said there'd be wire cutters in the shack?"

Terry nodded. "What are you going to do with wire cutters?"

"I'm cutting the fence that separates Eight Q from Tate Rilmaster's spread. Rilmaser's beef is going to wander through I just got a hunch that when your half-brothers discover that, and find where the wire had been cut, they'll figure Rilmaster is moving in on his own hook."

"And you think that will—"

"I just got a hunch it ain't going to set well with Durk and Lee. They're not the knucklin'-under kind, and I don't think they're exactly scared of Rilmaster. They'll go in with him on a crooked deal, but the question remains will they stand for him horning in on the Eight Q." He shrugged. "Think you could make a rough sketch of where most of Rilmaster's beef might be located?"

"I'm well acquainted with the area," Terry said.

In one of the cupboards Jim found a stub pencil. Terry drew a rough map of the Eight Q spread. She marked certain points as landmarks. He was ready to go.

"I'll probably be gone the rest of the day and most of the night," he told her. "You'll be safe here. It'll take me quite a while to cut the fence and start some cattle drifting through. . . ."

V

IT WAS A four hour ride to his destination. He coursed along a two-strand barbed wire fence for a mile, and clipped eight wide gaps in it. He debated the problem of pushing Rilmaster cattle down on Eight Q land, and judged he better tackle that part of the job a few hours after full dark had set in. It would be a tough job herding cattle out of draws by night, but it was the only method by which he could be certain his movements would be masked.

He found a secluded draw, loosened the girth of the pony and pegged it on a reata so it could graze. He himself relaxed under a cedar tree, smoking and watching the sun settle below the peaks. Blue sky turned pink, then amber, then dulled gradually to gray, and suddenly it was black night.

He found Rilmaster cattle in small bunches in sequestered shelters. He didn't dare yell to shake them down, he had to be content with using a paralyzing patience to urge the sleep-stubborn animals down slope. He finally guessed it must be nearly four o'clock in the morning, and he'd kept rought count on about five hundred head he'd started toward Eight Q land. Enough,

he felt confident, to start the ball rolling. If. . . .

He headed away from the area. His horse was showing some signs of weariness, so he didn't attempt to travel fast. He got lost a couple times, but always managed to find one of the land-marks Terry had sketched for him on the table top. Now he was nearing the line shack.

She was standing in front of the dug-out when he slid down from the saddle. He could tell that Terry had not slept well.

Jim nodded grimly as he stripped gear from the horse and set it free inside the pole corral.

"Well," he said, "I've set the bait. We've got to pray for some luck now."

"You better turn in and get some rest."

"I better eat first."

"Will a can of beans and some hard-tack be good enough?"

He grinned and wiped his mouth. "Sound like turkey to me, Terry."

He talked as he spooned beans into his mouth and crunched on the hard tack.

"We oughta wait until about mid-afternoon, and then take a pasear over toward Eight Q headquarters to see if the rats are nibbling at the cheese yet."

"What are we going to do if they are?"

Grant blinked and ate wolfishly. "Dunno. That is to say, Terry, it all depends on luck and circumstance from here on out. Maybe they'll fall in like the forty thieves. . . ." He waved one hand.

"And if they do that?"

He grinned and swiped at a mouth corner. "Same thing—luck and circumstance."

She roused him from dead slumber in the early afternoon. He rolled from the bunk and shook his head. Terry paced nervously around the shack.

"I hate to punish that pony of yours by doubling up on him," Grant told her. "Maybe you could wait here."

"I think I'll go along," Terry said.

She said it with a stubborness that he knew would not fall apart with argument.

Three hours later, they halted on a high rim overlooking the Eight Q.

"Not a doggoned thing going on down there," Jim said disappointedly.

"Perhaps they've thrown in together."

A far shot came echoing across the peaks.

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Jim grinned. "It could be. It just could be."

THEY tethered the pony to a tree, and waited. In about five minutes a second report echoed faintly. Then, in swift succession, there were half a dozen more. Finally, out of the timber line on the far side of the valley, three horsemen came at a dead run.

"I reckon the poison done took," Jim murmured softly. "You pull in your wings, Terry, and stay put right here."

"What are you going to do, Jim?"

"There's still a chance the cheese might run out, Terry. I got to get in a position to do some priming." He glanced into the valley below. The trio of horsemen had fanned out, and two now were turning and stopping. Grant watched them lift rifles and fire several rounds. But he could not see their targets.

"Keep out of sight, Terry," he cautioned her. "And don't use your rifle unless you have to."

He mounted and rode in a wide circle on the higher level. Riding into view once, he saw a half dozen men on foot working their way down the slope from the direction of Rilmaster's land.

He got off his horse, dropped to one knee, and sent a long shot at one of the men afoot.

The man whirled lamely, wobbled two steps back up the incline and pitched to the ground. With grim, white lips, Grant again mounted. He moved another hundred yards, and again got off his horse. He peered between branches and had lifted his rifle when a great crashing sounded at his rear. He whirled and swept off his hat and swatted his horse with it. The animal bolted and vanished in the brush. A pair of riders crested a knoll. Grant twisted away, but they had already sighted him. With a yell, they charged.

A hot sear ran along Jim's forearm. Then his rifle was up and kicking back at him. One man was toppling sidewise and screaming, but the second was riding him down. Grant hopped to one side as the horseman roared at him. As the man passed, firing with his six-gun, Grant's snap shot hit the burly figure, lifting him from his seat and sending him tumbling into a rocky crevice. The horse never broke stride, and Jim Grant could hear it, galloping to the lower area.

Jim glanced at his bleeding arm. The slug had dug a shallow furrow the length of his forearm. It wasn't bleeding badly, more of an oozing wound, and he disregarded it for the moment and started footing it downslope.

He hurried the quarter mile that brought him to the valley level. Out on the flat were two riderless horses, and he couldn't decide whether they belonged to the two men he'd shot.

Now he sighted three men afoot, and they seemed to be converging on the bunkhouse. He decided to wait.

He thought one of the group resembled Rilmaster. He was a big man, and he was waving one arm excitedly. They had maneuvered to a position behind the big barn, and for a moment were together in a huddled conference. Then two of them turned away, pausing a moment at the building corner, then sprinting across the open yard toward the bunkhouse, rifles flaming.

Someone inside the bunkhouse was returning their fire. But the pair hopping across the open area avoided being hit. Jim saw them storm the bunkhouse doorway.

He turned his eyes back to the man he thought was Rilmaster.

The big fellow stood waiting. Jim made a wide circle, and approached from the opposite side of the barn.

Suddenly the shooting inside the bunkhouse stopped. Jim took up a temporary position behind the barn. Then he hopped through a window and hurried along past the horse stalls. As he gained the entrance, he stopped, drawing back. Then he whirled and leaped inside a stall. It was Tate Rilmaster. He was legging it past the stable entrance, toward the bunkhouse.

Rilmaster, half across the yard, stopped and crouched and lifted his rifle. From the bunkhouse the hulk of Lee Quarterman lurched. He was blood from head to foot. And when he sighted Rilmaster, he stopped and stood stiffly teetering for balance. A six-gun dangled from his fingers.

Jim heard Rilmaster's heavy voice. "Hello, Lee."

"Hi, Tate." Lee's voice was taut with caution.

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Rilmaster gave a soft chuckle. "Looks like it's whittled down to you and me, Lee."

"Appears like it, Tate."

There was a minute of dead silence.

It was Rilmaster speaking again. "What're you and me gonna do, Lee?"

"Well, I dunno, Tate. Looks like we got a nice setup here."

"You and me?"

"Yeah."

Neither seemed to have the confidence he could kill the other.

"S'pose we make a deal," Rilmaster said.

They stepped nearer each other. In a moment Jim was cursing to himself. He saw the two big men shaking hands. Jim walked stiffly from the stable, his rifle swinging in one hand.

"The deal's off, gents," he called out.

Both men whirled away from each other to face Jim.

"Britt McGarry!" Rilmaster yelled.

Lee Quarterman jerked to one side and spat out an oath. For an instant he looked as though he'd seen a ghost.

"How in hell did you get outa that river?" Lee snarled.

"I'm part fish," Grant said tersely. He kept edging forward, one slow step at a time.

"Dead fish!" Lee yelled. His gun came up flaming.

Jim Grant sunfished to one side, throwing a shot with his rifle that ripped open Lee's chest. Rilmaster yelled and tried to sight his rifle.

Jim fired from his hip. Rilmaster staggered back, shooting his gun at the sky. He wiggled frantically trying to stay on his feet, then a gush of blood spewed from his forehead, flooding his face.

But both men were dead.

Jim hurried over and glanced inside the bunkhouse. The inside was still smoky, and four men were sprawled in death. He turned away, half sick. He glanced past the house and saw a small figure afoot, hurrying toward the house.

The sun was wheeling low, and it seemed to focus on the red hair of the figure hurrying toward him. He didn't think his legs would hold him up much longer. He plopped down on the seat of his pants, waiting.

THE SIREN

By H. W. GLEASON

There's a pinto down in Rojas hammer-headed, hard as nails;
There's a sou'west wind a-blowin', driftin' sand across the trails;
There's ten thousand millin' dogies, waitin' restless for the drive.
With the stink an' sound o' critters fit to kill a man alive;
There's a Texas sun above 'em fit to make yore tongue sprout fur;
There is miles o' weed an' cactus, spiked with prickle, spine an' bur;
There'll be chuck-machinery beltin', burnt frijoles, rock and' such . . .
There's a top-notch trail boss wanted . . . Will I take the job? *Not much!*

That pinto ain't no softy—'less yo're callus in the seat;
That sand looks great on beaches, but it's hell to breathe an' eat;
Them bawlin' dogies scatter, goin' spooky at a sound—
—You sit an' croon them lullabies till sun-up comes around!
The fever an' the tumbleweed an' trail sores all combine
With chuck that's wild an' woolly an' dinero whittled fine . . .
Another drive, from this far off, is somethin' pretty sour;
An' yet—*ain't that the Rojas stage that's leavin' in an hour?*

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